The FOUR Stages of Enlightenment

A GUIDE TO AWAKENING, NONDUALITY, & THE END OF SUFFERING

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to All. There is nothing and no one that didn't play part in the creation of this book. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

While on vacation, I came across a book about enlightenment on the bookshelf (*The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle). Although I had zero interest in spirituality—and had been an atheist all of my life—I read the book and headed home without giving it much thought.

When I got home, something felt weird. It was subtle at first, but it quickly intensified. I had stumbled into awakening by accident. And it was nothing like I thought it would be.

After many months of blindly searching for answers, I eventually discovered the four stages of enlightenment (e.g., Ingram, 2018; Sayadaw, 2016; Schanilec, n.d.). According to Buddhist texts, there are four stages between initial awakening and full enlightenment. Although many of us have heard about the peace of *full*

enlightenment (or the fourth stage of enlightenment), most of us have not heard much about the first three stages of enlightenment. In these earlier stages, we may feel bliss and happiness, but we may also feel lost, lonely, and distressed. Many of us will face challenges that we didn't even know were possible. And some of us will even long for the days before we woke up.

A Modern Interpretation

It is clear that the ancient Buddhist maps provide a really useful framework for the entire journey to enlightenment. However, the language from these older texts can be hard to comprehend. The spiritual context doesn't generally align with Western lifestyles. And, there is relatively little information on what it's like to traverse these stages in the modern world.

So, this book is a modern map and secular guide to navigating all four stages of enlightenment. This way, you'll have a better understanding of where you are on the path. But, you'll also have simple information, exercises, and examples that help you move forward. My hope is that this approach will help you avoid getting stuck, getting lost, or going in circles and, ultimately, reach the end of suffering.

The Four Stages of Enlightenment

Stage 1

Once we have our initial awakening, we are in the first stage of enlightenment. This initial awakening involves

seeing through a part of our self-concept (or identity) and gaining a whole new perspective on what we really are (e.g., Dilullo, 2021). Although this can be extremely inspiring and beautiful, it can also be overwhelming, confusing, and full of illusions.

Stage 2

In the second stage of enlightenment, we become aware of the mental processes of attachment and aversion. We can now see how these processes seem to create suffering. Although we begin to break free from the suffering of attachment and aversion, this letting-go process can be quite painful at times. Eventually, we learn how to stop attaching and avoiding, and by the end of this stage, very few *external* experiences can truly bother us.

Stage 3

In the third stage of enlightenment, boundaries dissolve, and we finally start to experience nonduality or oneness. Without the mind constantly labeling, conceptualizing, and trying to control everything, we begin to experience life as it truly is. With continued honest observation of our experiences, more parts of the self are seen through, and, eventually, the physical experience of being a separate 'me' dissolves. Suffering is seen through, and finally, we are free.

Stage 4

In the fourth stage of enlightenment, the physical sensation of self is gone, suffering is gone, and both are seen to have never existed in the first place. Thus, the

self does not become enlightened; enlightenment is the process of seeing through the self.

Awakening Can Happen To Anyone

Because awakening is actually a simple, natural part of our individual and collective development, it can happen to anyone. No matter what your background is—whether you are religious, spiritual, or even atheist—you can wake up. If you want to awaken, you don't need a "guru" because there are no gatekeepers. You don't need to be anyone "special" because growth and awareness are a natural part of your existence. You don't need a single thing—past, present, or future—to be different because enlightenment is always right here waiting for you.

About This Book

This book is intended to serve as a guide and map for anyone who is awakening—or who wants to—regardless of your spiritual, educational, or cultural background. You won't have to learn any new spiritual concepts or terms, take on any new beliefs, or create any new identities. By skipping these unnecessary steps—steps that tend to slow us down—you can more quickly and easily reach full enlightenment and move beyond suffering. And that's what we all really want, right?

- We'll start by reviewing the four stages of enlightenment. You'll learn what to expect when

you awaken and the types of experiences you might have in each of the four stages.
- Then, we'll review some psychological foundations that can help you better understand the path that leads to awakening.
- In the remaining chapters, we'll dive deeper into the psychological challenges of each stage, do exercises to increase clarity, and use some of my own experiences as examples.

If you want a guide that helps you navigate the often-complex awakening journey, helping you find the end suffering for good, then this is the book for you.

Why Read This Book

At earlier stages of enlightenment, later insights can be completely incomprehensible. And at later stages, earlier guidance is no longer useful. That's why it can be extremely helpful to have a guide, such as this book, to help you understand where you (and others) are on the path. This can help you find the right support at the right times to keep moving forward.

This book is also intended to serve as a buddy, reminding you that you're not alone. Even though awakening is available to every person, the world is still fairly early in its *collective* development. More and more people are awakening, but most are still in the early stages of enlightenment, many have gotten lost on their journey, and few have reached *full* enlightenment. So, if you do awaken, it is likely that the majority of people around you will still be asleep.

On one hand, this is an incredible blessing. How lucky we are to awaken in a world that is still suffering so badly. On the other hand, moving through the four stages of enlightenment can, at times, be incredibly difficult. Very few people around us will understand what we're going through, and some people will even react to our awakening in negative or destructive ways. Hopefully, this book will show you that there *are* people who understand what you're going through, people who can help you, and many more people who are on the path right behind you. Regardless of where each of us is on this path, we're all walking it together.

What To Expect

Whether you are awake yet or not, this book will show you the path to and through the four stages of enlightenment. Depending on where you are in your journey, some things in this book will make sense and others won't. If some of the information doesn't make sense now, that's okay. The insights you gain from this book can not be lost. There is a part of you that will remember and make use of the information when and if it becomes appropriate for your growth.

Trigger Warning

The content and exercises in this book can be triggering. Although my writing style is often compassionate and warm, it is also honest and direct. This approach can be very potent, which is a good

thing if you want to awaken and move through the four stages of enlightenment. However, it can also sometimes result in disorienting, destabilizing, and upsetting experiences.

While reading, you may flash on insights that change the way you experience small or large aspects of your life. This may lead you to feel inspired, free, or joyful. But it may also lead you to become frightened, angry, or overwhelmed. While you certainly don't need to agree with anything I've written, surprisingly strong resistance may arise as the self tries to defend its own existence. So, if you feel overly distressed at any point, please take care of yourself, put this book aside for a bit, slow down, and/or seek professional support from a therapist, counselor, or Internal Family Systems practitioner.

Making Progress

For those who continue reading this book all the way to the end, I want to applaud your bravery. Enlightenment is a process that involves letting go of *everything* we thought to be true. So, you are bound to have ups and downs on the path, especially if you're determined to keep going through all four stages to the end of suffering.

If you want to make more progress but find yourself getting stuck for long periods of time, it's usually because there is something you're not fully acknowledging. This generally has to do with some aspect of the self-concept that you have gotten

attached to. As soon as you stop avoiding and/or stop attaching to whatever it is that is blocking you, you'll keep moving forward on your path.

Words Are Pointers

I have done my best to communicate clearly and directly in this book. However, nothing I say should be taken as the ultimate Truth. Because all words refer to concepts, this makes them imperfect tools for explaining enlightenment, which is beyond concepts. Your job will be to use the models, metaphors, examples, and exercises in this book as pointers to discover the truth for yourself.

Levels of Truth

When we have our initial awakening (and enter into the first stage of enlightenment) we have some sort of realization that leads us to see that truth—the truth that we used to believe 100%—isn't true at all. This often leads us to adopt a new definition of truth. We then believe this new truth 100%. But, what appears to be true now will shift several more times before we reach the fourth stage of enlightenment. So, as we begin to wake up, it can be helpful to keep in mind this idea of "levels of truth". We're best served by not getting too attached to anything, even the idea of truth.

Additional Resources

To get more support related to this book, explore other awakening teachers, resources, and communities, and read more about the awakening process, join me at awakeningcollective.org.

CHAPTER 1

THE FOUR STAGES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

According to ancient Buddhist texts, there are four stages between initial awakening and full enlightenment. These are sometimes referred to as "the four stages of enlightenment". As we move through the four stages of enlightenment, we progressively let go of, dissolve, or see through more of the self-concept until it is entirely gone. Once we move through all four stages of enlightenment, we reach *full* enlightenment.

About The Four Stages of Enlightenment

My own awakening arose spontaneously, without spiritual training, knowledge, or a guide of any kind. Although I looked for support, my awakening progressed so quickly that many of the teachers I interacted with were only helpful for a short while—I quickly saw what they were pointing to and kept

moving forward. As a result, I often felt quite lost, lonely, and disoriented.

It wasn't until I found the Buddhist maps of enlightenment (e.g., Ingram, 2018; Sayadaw, 2016; Schanilec, n.d.) that I was able to understand why my awakening experience was different from other people's—I was just in a different stage. By having a map, we can understand where we are and where we're going, and this makes it easier to seek out the support we need to move through the process successfully.

Overview of The Four Stages

In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the four stages of enlightenment. It's important to keep in mind that our path through the four stages of enlightenment is not linear. Although you *may* go through these stages and phases in the order I describe, it's important to note that everyone is different. We can be in multiple stages of enlightenment at the same time, and we may go back and forth between stages for months, years, or even a lifetime.

Your experiences may also be completely different than my experiences. There are key insights that arise in each stage (e.g., Schanilec, n.d.), but how we come about these insights, and how we experience their effects, can be vastly different. For those of us without a background in meditation or spirituality, it can even be difficult to recognize what insights we've had—everything just feels different, and it's hard to say why.

So, this chapter is meant to serve as a general map of the path from initial awakening to full enlightenment. But, the bypaths you take and the experiences you have will almost certainly be different than what I describe.

Stage 1 of Enlightenment

Partial Identity Dissolution

For many, a difficult period of meaninglessness, grief, and disillusion precedes awakening (e.g., Tolle, 2004). Awakening is then triggered when some part of the self-concept is seen through. Because we are not one solid thing (Wilber, 2007), the self-concept actually consists of many different parts. So, any part of ourselves can realize its own lack of separate existence and begin to dissolve. Thus, awakening can be experienced in a near-infinite number of different ways.

Of course, we have already experienced identity shifts many times prior to awakening. But, during these earlier shifts, we always expanded *within* the self-concept. In other words, we still felt like a self; the self just changed its characteristics. In the past, we may have added to our identity or let go of parts of our identity that no longer served us—for example, maybe we stopped seeing ourselves as weak, stupid, or unlovable.

Once we awaken, however, we begin to move *beyond* the self-concept. Rather than *changing* individual parts

of the self-concept, parts of the self-concept are seen not to exist at all. For example, maybe we see that we are not the body, the mind, or the doer of our actions. Although the dissolution of a part of the self-concept is a **huge** deal, and it changes the way we see everything, this is just the very first step in the very first stage of enlightenment.

Disidentification

As awakening takes hold, we zoom out and begin seeing our experiences from a wider perspective. Some people describe this as seeing reality from the perspective of 'witnessing awareness', the 'higher self', or the 'I am' sense. As a psychologist, I prefer the term 'awareness'. So I'll use the term 'awareness' throughout the rest of this book to refer to this zoomed-out perspective.

This is a really important shift where, instead of viewing the world through our beliefs, thoughts, and emotions, we begin to witness our experiences from a more expanded or non-attached perspective. At this point, we begin to see that our awareness (or this more expanded part of us) observes all of our other psychological experiences—experiences such as concepts, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, social experiences, and physical experiences. We then begin to disidentify from these experiences.

It's important to note that many of us will now re-identify with the expanded part of us. At this point, it is not at all uncommon to develop a spiritual ego or become attached to an identity as a higher being, soul,

awake self, or spacious awareness. This new identity can be helpful, temporarily, but it often becomes a significant hurdle later on. So, it's best to remain as humble as we can about any new identities that form at this point. We have indeed glimpsed true reality, but at this first stage of enlightenment, nothing is what it seems to be. Soon enough, if we keep moving through the stages of enlightenment, we'll discover that what seemed to be real here was just another layer of illusions.

The Fullness Phase

Next, most of us enter 'the fullness phase'. This phase is sort of like a honeymoon period. During this phase, life feels 'full'—full of experiences of joy, bliss, connection, gratitude, completeness, unity, synchronicity, mystical experiences, and sometimes even 'supernatural' abilities. Often, we will feel experiences of rapture—goosebumps, exhilaration, and happiness unlike anything we've ever known. We tend to feel both infinitely free and connected to everything, simultaneously.

Overall, this phase can be characterized by a sense of moving 'up and out' (Adyashanti, 2009). It often feels expansive, and we may even have experiences where we feel like we are merged with everything. The ordinary problems of daily life are not currently affecting us, and we get a taste of true freedom.

This phase may last minutes, days, weeks, months, or possibly years. Some of us may even begin to think we're enlightened because we are truly happy. But this

phase is simply a part of the awakening process. Even though we are now awake to some extent, we are still quite far away from full enlightenment and the end of suffering. Still, this glimpse shows us what is possible and that we are on the right track. It also serves as a carrot at the end of a stick that can help us keep moving forward through the challenges that are up ahead.

The Emptiness Phase

If we continue moving forward, the fullness phase is generally followed by an emptiness phase. All the joyful, connected experiences vanish, and we often experience the deep suffering of separateness. It's as if the peaceful, beautiful stream that we were joyfully floating in turns into a rocky, raging river.

Instead of feeling completely full and connected with life, we now feel completely empty and disconnected from life. We may, at some point, have the realization that "I am nothing". In other words, we see that the "I" that we thought we were doesn't exist. This may evoke considerable sadness, depression, or nihilism, and we may grieve the loss of our former self.

This phase begins a process of moving 'down and in' (Adyashanti, 2009). Now that we've gotten a taste of freedom, we have to go back into our mind and resolve all of our old issues. If we're willing to allow this 'down and in' process to do its work, it will take us all the way through the awakening journey. But if we resist or cling to the blissful experiences of the 'up and out' process, we're likely to get stuck.

Emotional Processing

Throughout awakening, the psychological material that we have spent our lives avoiding, suppressing, and repressing starts to come into awareness. Because we can no longer hide from ourselves, our old traumas, repressed emotions, and unhealed emotional issues can no longer be avoided.

In the first purge of this trauma, we may sob heavily for months as we finally acknowledge, experience, and accept the strongest and deepest pains that we have been carrying. Although we will likely feel depressed at times, it is ultimately a release—a catharsis that often feels like a huge relief once it's over. It's important to note that some people experience this purge before awakening and some experience it after.

Getting Stuck

Some of us will stay in this first stage of enlightenment. We're somewhat awake—and that generally makes life a lot more enjoyable. We do get to enjoy the freedom that has come from letting some of the self-concept go. But, our 'awakeness' comes and goes in daily life, and we still suffer. In fact, realizing that we are still suffering may help us let go of this stage and continue moving forward.

Stage 2 of Enlightenment

Awareness of Attraction & Aversion

Prior to awakening, it looked like suffering was caused by particular experiences. Bad circumstances seemed to create suffering. But now, awareness focuses its attention on attraction and aversion. As a result, we begin to see, in real time, that it is not experiences that cause suffering. From this perspective, it looks like suffering is created when the mind attaches to or pushes away experiences.

We can clearly see that 'bad' experiences aren't actually bothersome—what's bothersome is that our mind is constantly trying to push and pull on these experiences. For example, something happens in our life, then the mind uses its concepts to label the situation as 'good' or 'bad'. If the situation is labeled as 'bad', then the mind tries to push it away. This resistance or pushing away is what actually *feels* bad.

If the situation is labeled as 'good', then the mind attaches or clings to it and tries to pull it closer. Because no experience is permanent, the 'good' situation eventually ends. So the clinging, attachment, or pulling in of something that can never last also feels bad. As we witness this parade of horribles, we slowly gain insight into attachment and aversion.

Letting Go of Outcomes

As we continue to observe attachment and aversion, we begin to let go of these processes, a little bit at a

time. Every time the mind tricks us into 'wanting' or 'not wanting', we witness ourselves suffer. This experience is often so painful that at a certain point, it just becomes totally obvious that it's not worth it. Although our minds will try to keep pushing and pulling for a while—usually out of habit—we slowly learn how to stop attaching and avoiding.

Practically speaking, this might mean we stop caring about outcomes. For example, if we miss our flight, it's okay because we are not attached to things going as planned. If someone yells at us about something, it's okay because we weren't expecting them to react differently. We still feel emotions and have expectations about life, but we don't blame *external* circumstances or people for our own *internal* experiences. Instead, we use our upsets as opportunities to look inward and find the mental processes that are still causing our suffering.

Staying Vigilant

By this point, the self has weakened significantly. Rather than throwing massive temper tantrums all day long, like it used to, it simply broods quietly in the corner of awareness. However, it still has a few tricks up its sleeve, and it builds up strength to pounce whenever we let our guard down.

Just when we feel settled, thoughts will swoop in and try to convince us that we still need them—that we will **DIE** without them. This can happen many, many times. In fact, most of us will have to witness and experience all of our old triggers, allowing them into awareness

fully so that we can prove to ourselves that, no, they won't kill us.

Meaninglessness & Low Motivation

As this process gains momentum, we may experience a pronounced dip in motivation. It turns out that 'wanting' and 'not wanting' drove the majority of our behavior. At this point, life can feel meaningless. It can be difficult to work, hard to engage in social interactions, and even boring to do many of the things that we used to enjoy.

Although it's common to experience a sense of meaninglessness immediately prior to awakening, this current phase of meaninglessness goes a bit deeper. We realize that meaning, itself, is just a collection of thoughts and not actually real. This realization begins to erode the mental mechanisms that are involved in the meaning-making process. So, it's not so much that we're not finding meaning; meaning is no longer available. During this stage, I stopped exercising, seeing friends, and even going on vacations. My mind could no longer find a reason to do anything. Luckily, this phase passed. Activity resumed, albeit without motivation or outcomes as the driver.

Belief In The Self-Concept

At this stage, we will still feel like we are a separate self—we still have a few sticky aspects of the self-concept that we are attached to—but the *belief* that we are a separate self is gone. As we continue to progress, this belief will work its way into our thoughts, emotions, actions, social experiences, and finally, at the

end of the third stage of enlightenment, the physical sensation of self.

Although letting go of attraction, aversion, and the idea of self is often difficult, everything begins to change for the better. If there is no self, then we don't have to feel guilty for our actions. We don't have to worry about the future. We don't even have to make the "right" decisions. If we can make it through this stage, we find that things are much easier and we are much freer than ever before.

Stage 3 of Enlightenment

Embodying Experience

In this stage, attachment and aversion rarely pull our attention away from the present moment, so it gets a lot easier to stay with whatever arises in awareness. This makes the rest of the awakening process a bit easier. Our painful moments may be just as painful as before, but without attachment and aversion pulling our attention away from our suffering, we can finally turn towards it and embody it *fully*. As we sit with each instance of suffering, it finally reveals its true nature and begins to dissolve.

The Roller Coaster Phase

As we begin to be with our experiences more fully, we'll start to notice how we bounce back and forth between opposites. For example, we begin teeter-tottering between emptiness and fullness, one day feeling deep suffering and the next day feeling ecstatic bliss. Life is now trying to help us resolve

duality by showing us that all dualities—like fullness and emptiness—are two sides of the same coin. At times, we will experience the highest highs, and at other times, we will experience the lowest lows. We do this for as long as it takes for us to realize that they are the same thing.

By this point, all of our experiences seem to be happening on their own, outside of our control. Although we continue to observe whatever comes up, we no longer need to exert effort to engage in practices like meditation or self-inquiry—we no longer believe that there is a self that could choose to do so anyway. Whatever happens, happens on its own. We're simply strapped into the roller coaster of life, and we go wherever it takes us.

Paradoxical Reality

We've now passively experienced both fullness and emptiness. We then teeter-tottered back and forth between these experiences until we saw that they are the same thing. This may sound paradoxical, and it is, but at this point, opposing poles of experience begin to merge. 'Good' experiences and 'bad' experiences begin to look the same. 'Pleasant' and 'unpleasant' emotions start to feel the same. Internal (sensations) and external (perceptions) feel the same. Without the mind constantly labeling, conceptualizing, and trying to control everything, we begin to experience oneness, nonduality, or the interpenetration of everythingness.

Nonduality

Eventually, we can clearly see that our mind splits reality into many parts, creating innumerable dualities out of one thing and labeling it as many different sets of two things. It is only when the mind labels, categorizes, and conceptualizes things that they *seem* dual. In reality, everything is nondual.

As we see through more and more of our mental processes, we begin to experience reality as it truly is. In other words, we start to see how pairs of opposites—like good and bad, right and wrong, here and there, now and then—are actually made of the same neutral, nondual "stuff".

With continued observation, we see through even more subtle concepts—like time and space—that *seem* to make our reality. Because we are now experiencing our 5 senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—without the mental labels that we are used to, reality can actually start to look different. For example, the thoughts that label things as 'here' or 'there' may suddenly vanish and, as a result, things that used to appear far away look incredibly close. Although nonduality can be intense at times, it is generally fun, interesting, and beautiful.

Observing The Sensation of "Me"

As we continue to stay fully present with our experiences, they will get more and more subtle. What we used to call 'negative emotions' don't arise much anymore, but underneath, we discover the even more subtle sensations that still seem to create suffering. We

are now like *The Princess and The Pea*, an old tale about a princess who could feel a single pea under 20 mattresses. We can feel absolutely everything.

At some point, we will notice the sensations that seem to provide proof that we are a separate self. In the body, it may feel like a contraction, a feeling of holding the self together, a clenched fist in the gut (Adyashanti, 2009), or even a taste (Michelberger, 2022). To keep moving forward, we just have to stay present and move towards these uncomfortable sensations—that is, we acknowledge, experience, and accept them over and over again until they reveal what they really are.

Existential Fear

As the final bits of the self dissolve, many of us will come face-to-face with existential fear, or the fear of death, annihilation, or oblivion. As we approach existential fear, it might almost feel like we're being sucked into nothingness. Indeed, the self-concept is now facing its own death.

Most of us will resist and back away—perhaps a few times—terrified that if we allow this fear in, we will literally vanish. But once we fully surrender to our own existential fear—once we acknowledge it and experience it fully—we will have experiential knowing that it was all in our minds. What we once thought to be the great and powerful Oz was nothing more than a little old man pulling strings. As a result, fear can never trick us the way it used to.

This realization creates a previously unimaginable level of openness and acceptance. Now, we no longer want to turn away from *any* experiences; we want to turn towards them. If we can simply get the courage to look at the monsters under our bed, POOF, they disappear.

Core Suffering

If we keep digging deeper, we will finally find core suffering, restlessness, resistance, and ignorance (Schanilec, n.d.). This "core suffering" is held together by whatever concepts we still believe to be real. Ultimately, no concept is true and therefore, nothing can ever be known. Anything we seek can not be found. Everything that appears to be real is also unreal. As we sit with this insight, and it extends itself to our remaining concepts, our misunderstanding of reality fades, and the entire illusion dissolves permanently. There is nothing left, and suffering stops. Game over.

Stage 4 of Enlightenment

The Pathless Path

From the perspective of the self, we followed a path all the way to the end of suffering. From the perspective of enlightenment, there is no us and there is no path. From the perspective of the self, we spent decades suffering. From the perspective of enlightenment, we were always free. So, a weird thing occurs after full enlightenment. The self that we thought we were is never enlightened; it is just seen to have never existed in the first place.

Full Enlightenment

The truth is that we were never actually separate from the unshakable peace of reality; we only thought we were. So there are no big celebrations or mystical experiences at the gate to full enlightenment. The only difference now is that the self, and the mind that created it, are no longer clouding our view of reality as it really is.

Summary

Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of the four stages of enlightenment. As you can probably guess, there are lots of places to get stuck all along the path. So, not everyone makes it to the end. In the subsequent chapters, we'll explore the path to and through awakening in more depth so that you can get an idea of where you are, where you're going, and how to find your way to the end of suffering.

PRE-AWAKENING

CHAPTER 2

AWAKENING & THE SELF-CONCEPT

Prior to awakening, it appears that happiness is found in our experiences. For example, we might desire a particular job, achievement, relationship, possession, or numerous other experiences because we think they will bring us happiness. We may even look for happiness in subtler experiences like love, purpose, or belonging. But all of these are just experiences. They are temporary, and so they can not create the permanent, unshakable well-being that we seek.

Prior to awakening, experiences like these *seem* to generate well-being (or happiness) because we are identified with them. In other words, we feel like we *are* certain experiences. So, having these experiences reinforces our sense of self. This strengthening of the self makes us feel good (temporarily).

For example, if someone compliments our appearance, we feel good because we believe we *are* our physical self. If someone we like asks us on a date, we feel good because we believe we *are* our social self. If we get an award, we feel good because we believe we *are* our achiever self. If someone agrees with our opinion, we feel good because we believe we *are* our mental self. These experiences **increase** our well-being (temporarily) by **strengthening** our self-concept. Unfortunately, *all* experiences are temporary. So, no experience can ever result in the permanent, unshakable well-being that we desire.

The same thing is true for ill-being (or unhappiness). For example, if someone makes fun of our appearance, we feel hurt because we believe we *are* our physical self. If someone rejects us, we feel hurt because we believe we *are* our social self. If we fail to get the job we want, we feel hurt because we believe we *are* our achiever self. If someone disagrees with our opinion, we feel bad because we believe we *are* our mental self. These experiences **decrease** our well-being (temporarily) by **weakening** our self-concept. But again, all experiences are temporary. So, experiences can also never result in permanent *ill*-being.

Even though *permanent* well-being can not be found in experience, searching for well-being in experience is a normal part of our development. By bringing awareness to these experiences (usually many times over the course of many years), we eventually see that permanent well-being can not be found in *any* experiences.

For example, maybe we discover that no matter what we accomplish, it never makes us happy. Or maybe we find that no matter how much money we make, we're never satisfied. Or maybe we see that no relationship ever completely meets our needs. Or maybe we learn that no amount of meditation is enough to create permanent peace.

Although I can tell you that permanent happiness is not found in any experience, most people need to keep looking until they realize this for themselves. This was certainly true for me. For many of us, this 'seeking and not finding' process pushes us to look for happiness in more and more places until we eventually exhaust ourselves, realizing that lasting happiness can not be found anywhere we look or in anything we seek.

To help you better understand how this is playing out in your life, let's start by exploring your self-concept and how each part of your self-concept is currently pursuing well-being or happiness.

Exercise: Get To Know Your Self-Concept

In the following exercise, you'll be asked to explore different parts of your self-concept. Then, you'll identify how each part of your self-concept leads you to seek well-being (this is how it seeks to strengthen itself). Then you'll simply reflect on what it might be like without these parts of your self-concept running your life.

This exercise will also help you understand what I mean when I say 'self' or 'self-concept'. Since awakening is all about seeing through parts of the self-concept, it is often necessary to first understand what the self-concept is and how your unique self-concept operates.

If you have a journal or notebook, I suggest you write out your answers. This notebook will also come in handy later as I invite you to do more exercises.

All right, let's get to know your 'self'.

Explore your physical self:

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **physical self** (e.g., What do you look like? How does your body function? Do you notice any physical sensations in your body?)
- How does your **physical self** seek well-being? For example, does your body seek food, sex, warmth, coolness, endorphins (e.g., from things like exercise or adventure), sensations (e.g., from touch, drugs, or alcohol), or perceptions (e.g., from a beautiful view or an attractive mate)?
- If these aspects of your self-concept were gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Explore your social self:

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **social self** (e.g., Who do you spend time with? What makes you feel a sense of belonging? What are your most important relationships?)

- How does your **social self** seek well-being? For example, does your social self desire belonging, validation, recognition, acceptance, understanding, love, feeling needed, or feeling like a good or nice person?
- If these aspects of your self-concept were gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Explore your agentic self (the doer):

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **agentic self** (e.g., What are you good at? What do you spend most of your time doing? What do you know? What are your abilities? What actions do you take?)
- How does your **agentic self** seek well-being? For example, does your agentic self want to feel smart, capable, important, knowledgeable, effective, powerful, or special? What do you do to feel these things?
- If these aspects of your self-concept were gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Explore your achiever self:

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **achiever self** (e.g., What do you want to achieve? What achievements are important to you? What are your goals?)
- How does your **achiever self** seek well-being? For example, does your achiever self want to create money, success, relationships, experiences like vacations, positive emotions, awards, degrees, or other positive outcomes?

- If these aspects of your self-concept were gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Explore your mental self:

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **mental self** (e.g., What are your opinions? What are your perspectives? What do you think about most frequently? How would you describe your mind?)
- How does your **mental self** seek well-being? For example, does your mental self desire to know things or be understood, to be right, for others to agree with your opinions, or to understand many perspectives?
- If these aspects of your self-concept were gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Explore your contextual self:

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **contextual self** (e.g., What do you do in certain situations that you don't do in other situations? What roles do you play? What stories do you tell yourself about yourself? What aspects of your culture, family, or community have made you who you are?)
- How does your **contextual self** seek well-being? For example, does your contextual self play certain roles with certain people, tell stories that make you feel good about yourself, or repeat patterns in certain situations?
- If these aspects of your self-concept were gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Explore your overall self-concept:

- Take a moment now to reflect on your **conceptual self** (e.g., What is 'self'? When you think about yourself, can you find something other than the aspects of the self-concept that you reviewed in the earlier questions? Is the 'self' something other than a bundle of concepts?)
- How does your **conceptual self** seek well-being? For example, does your conceptual self like certain labels, personality traits, or experiences? Does it think of everything in relation to "I"? Does it create boundaries around 'mine' and 'yours'?
- If your entire self-concept was gone, how might your behavior change? How might your experiences change?

Hopefully, this exercise gave you a better understanding of the different parts of your self-concept, how each part strives to enhance well-being, and what your life might be like when the self-concept starts to fade.

Stages of Development

Humans go through a predictable series of developmental stages, starting at the time we are born. As we move into each new developmental stage, our awareness expands, leading us to add new features to our self-concept (e.g., Cook-Greuter, 2014).

In my book, *The Path To Well-Being*, I describe all of the developmental stages that lead us from birth to full

enlightenment, like they are colors in a rainbow. If you want to learn more about all the *developmental* stages, you can grab my **free** *Path To Well-Being* workbook here: berkeleywellbeing.com/path-to-well-being-book

Here is a quick overview of these developmental stages and the part of the self-concept that becomes most prominent in each stage (e.g., Cook-Greuter, 2014; O'Fallon, 2010; O'Fallon, 2020; Wilber, 2000; Wilber, 2024; Woods, 2022).

Pre-Conventional Stages

- Red: The physical self (1st person perspective)
- Orange: The social self (2nd person perspective)

Conventional Stages

- Yellow: The agentic or doer self (3rd person perspective)
- Green: The achiever or emotional self (Time-expanded 3rd person perspective)

Post-Conventional Stages

- Teal: The mental self (4th person perspective)
- Blue: The contextual self (Time-expanded 4th person perspective)

Transcendent Stages

- Indigo: The awakened self (5th person perspective)
- Violet: No-self or full enlightenment (6th person perspective)

Adding To The Self-Concept

As we move into each new developmental stage (prior to 5th person perspective), we add more to our self-concept. For example, when we move from the

social self (2nd person perspective) to the doer self (3rd person perspective; usually in high school or college), we begin to form a new identity as an independent agent or doer. We still have a social self with all of its social needs, preferences, and desires. However, we can also see that we have different characteristics than our family and childhood friends. Thus, the self-concept (or identity) gets more and more complex as we move through adult development.

How Does Identification Work?

Now that you have a better idea of your self-concept and how it grows, let's explore how the self-concept creates our apparent reality at different developmental stages. To start, recall that our experiences *seem* to generate well-being because we are identified with them—in other words, we think our experiences are us.

To better understand what I mean, let's use a metaphor. If you observe carefully, you will notice that awareness is in the background of all your experiences, observing or witnessing them, almost like it's looking through you (i.e., your self-concept) like a camera. So think of yourself like you are a camera. Awareness is looking through *you* at the world. It zooms in and out. It focuses on things. But it can't see the entire world. It only sees what can be viewed through you, the camera.

In a way, a camera holds experiences inside of it. For example, if a camera is pointed at a flower, that flower appears to be an image *on* the lens—it appears to be a

part of the camera at that moment. If a photo is taken, that image stays inside the camera on the film or memory card and remains a part of the camera for some time.

The same is true for you. Awareness looks through you. If awareness is looking at an emotion, for example, you feel like the emotion is part of you. It feels like the emotion ***is*** you because it's right there on your lens!

Another interesting thing happens when you zoom out with a camera. Even if it was in focus before, it needs to refocus to bring clarity to the new, wider perspective. The same is true for us. As our awareness expands, we need to continually refocus on aspects of reality that have become blurry. When things are out of focus, they are more likely to confuse us, elude us, frighten us, irritate us, threaten us, or otherwise cause suffering. So the more focus and clarity we can bring to our experience, the better. We generally can do this by building our psychological skills.

Stages of Development & Awareness

Let's continue using the camera metaphor to understand what happens when we move through the stages of development.

Pre-conventional stages (1st and 2nd person perspective)
In the earliest stages of human development (at birth), we are all the way zoomed in. In early childhood, we

are only aware of our own physical body and sensations, and then we begin to become aware that other people exist separate from us and that they have their own desires and experiences separate from ours. This process is sometimes referred to as Theory of Mind, and it generally arises in early childhood (Frith & Frith, 2005). For most of us, this evolves into a self-concept that includes our family, close peers, social group, or small community (2nd person perspective; Cook-Grueter, 2014).

Conventional stages (3rd person perspective)

As we move into the conventional stages of development, awareness zooms out a bit more, and we become increasingly aware of our separation from others. Many of us begin to discover our unique characteristics and the ways in which we are different from those around us. This gives rise to the belief in our own agency or doership. For example, you might notice that many young adults suddenly realize that they can choose to do things differently from their parents. If this perspective continues to expand, it will evolve into an understanding that our actions affect our outcomes.

Post-conventional stages (4th person perspective)

If we move into the post-conventional stages of development, awareness zooms out even more, and we start to see the *context* in which individuals, small groups, and larger societies operate. We might see how thoughts, perspectives, and beliefs arise in particular societies or in particular situations, for example. This evolves into an understanding that although we have

control over some of our actions and outcomes, many of our beliefs and patterns arise as a result of social conditions (or genetics) that we have absolutely no control over.

If this perspective continues to expand, awareness zooms out as much as the camera allows. Awareness wants to zoom out more, but this is as far as the camera goes—we've fully explored the world using the camera (i.e., our self-concept). Thus, there is a big perspective shift that needs to happen for us to keep growing.

Transcendent stages (5th and 6th person perspective)

If we take the leap, we often reidentify as awareness and begin to see glimpses of what the world looks like when we're not looking through the camera (i.e., when we're not looking through the self-concept). Over time, we re-observe everything from this new perspective, and we see that because we can observe it, it is not who we are. Every experience that once seemed like 'the self' starts to look like an image on a lens. And everything that once threatened our 'self' seems silly—it's just what we are looking at; it's not who we are. As a result, we slowly stop identifying with experiences.

Once we have disidentified with external experiences—like money, achievement, relationships, etc...—awareness starts to observe the mechanisms of the camera itself. We see that the whole picture-taking, zooming-out, focusing-in process was simply an activity of the camera and not what we are. In other

words, we disidentify from the *sensations* that make things like free will, the self, and suffering seem real. And finally, awareness turns back on itself. Awareness sees that because it can observe itself, even it is not what we are.

We now no longer identify with anything—not concepts, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, actions, physical sensations, external objects, or even awareness. We are totally free because we are not identified with anything, and everything that arises feels miraculous because it is totally free.

In Review:

- Awareness is what is looking through your self-concept to see experience.
- Your current developmental stage is how far you are zoomed out (i.e., how much experience you can see directly).
- Awakening is when a part of you zooms out into the perspective of awareness.
- Full enlightenment is when you are no longer identified with anything.

Intellectual Versus Experiential Knowing

When we transition into each new developmental stage, we go from understanding something (intellectually) to knowing it (experientially). And the types of things we know experientially are different at each stage. Because awakening is fairly far into development, there are many books and teachers that describe the awakening process intellectually—that is,

they have studied it and are writing about what they have learned from the perspective of the developmental stage that they are currently in. This can indeed be helpful. It's just important to keep in mind that these insights will be filtered through the parts of the self-concept that they are most identified with.

For example, many teachings talk about the actions that we need to take to wake up. These teachings are likely presented from the perspective of the agentic/doer or achiever self (3rd person perspective). Other teachings focus on how to change our thoughts and beliefs. These teachings are likely presented from the perspective of the mental or contextual self (4th person perspective). Other teachings focus on recognizing that we are awareness, itself. These teachings are likely presented from the perspective of the aware self (5th person perspective). And finally, some teachings suggest that there is no self at all (e.g., Parsons, 2000). These teachings are likely presented from the perspective of full enlightenment (6th person perspective).

None of these perspectives are right or wrong. In fact, working with teachers who speak about awakening from the perspective that we're currently at may be quite helpful. However, we need to be careful not to believe in, or attach to, any perspective (including the perspectives in this book). Perspectives shift as we move through the stages of development and through the four stages of enlightenment. Holding onto any perspective only gets us stuck.

Summary

When the mind decides that an experience is good, it is added to our self-concept. We then seek more of it to strengthen our self-concept, which feels good (at least temporarily). As we grow and move through the developmental stages, we add more and more to our self-concept, trying desperately to increase our well-being, one experience at a time. Eventually, we realize that no matter how big the self-concept gets, and no matter what experiences we have, they don't make us happy. With any luck, this leads us to awaken and move into the first stage of enlightenment.

CHAPTER 3

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AWAKENING

If we are thinking about awareness like it's looking through us like a camera, we can start to think of the perspective of each developmental stage like it's a different colored lens that we place on top of the camera at different times. For a moment, let's imagine that we are currently looking through a yellow lens. Everything we see looks yellow, and this yellowness affects all of our other experiences.

For example, with our yellow lens on, we may *believe* that an orange fruit is a lemon. We may then have *thoughts* that we should make lemonade. We may then have *emotions* of excitement about making the lemonade. We may then take lemon-focused *actions*—we use a lemonade recipe instead of an orange juice recipe.

In this example, the perspective (or lens) that's laid over our awareness has just affected our beliefs, then our thoughts, then our emotions, and then our behaviors. In this example, you can see that our perspective affects *all* of our experiences, and it does so in a specific order.

The Emergent Process of Psychological Experiences

The process model below shows how psychological experiences seem to emerge and the order in which they do so (they flow from left to right). In other words, the earlier experiences seem to cause the later experiences. And *all* of these experiences contribute to what we would describe as 'the self' or the self-concept.

This is how experiences flow:

Awareness > Concepts > Beliefs > Thoughts > Emotions > Behaviors > Social Experiences > Physical Experiences

Research supports each of these steps. First, awareness must exist for us to observe or experience anything (e.g., Wilber, 2024). Therefore, awareness is an integral part of experience.

Concepts are what define these experiences and enable us to form beliefs. For example, we need to have a concept (or mental idea) of God in order to

believe in God. We need to have a concept of the self in order to believe in the self. We need to have a concept of a sandwich in order to believe in a sandwich.

The way we define each of our concepts affects the types of beliefs we have about ourselves and our world (e.g., Cook-Grueter, 2014; O'Fallon, 2010). In other words, if we define art as something that has to be beautiful, we will believe that only beautiful things are art. If, on the other hand, we define art as any creative work, we might believe that art includes scribbles by children, ugly paintings, or even creative computer code. As you can see, our beliefs depend on our concepts.

Further psychological research shows that beliefs lead to thoughts (Buschmann et al., 2018). Simply, if I believe that I am unworthy, I will have thoughts about my unworthiness. Thoughts are then a necessary precondition for emotion (Lazarus, 1982). For example, if I have unworthy thoughts, I may feel emotions related to unworthiness.

It is also important to note that many researchers believe that emotions are a type of thought (e.g., Solomon, 2003). Indeed, many emotions (e.g., regret, contempt, shame) are clearly a combination of thoughts. However, even "pure" emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness) become thoughts once we label them as emotions. In other words, once you label an experience as 'sad', it becomes a thought. Thus, emotions can be seen as stepping stones between the

cognitive evaluation of a situation (i.e., thoughts) and behavior (Mauss & Robinson, 2009; Sander et al., 2003).

Additional studies show that specific emotions lead us to engage in specific behaviors that result in specific social experiences. For example, jealousy is thought to motivate us to restore important social bonds in the face of threats. Embarrassment motivates others to forgive us if we have done something wrong. And sadness motivates sympathy and leads others to help us more (Keltner & Kring, 1998). Thus, each emotion leads to specific actions (although these actions will vary somewhat for each individual).

All of these experiences contribute to physical (e.g., body or health) outcomes (e.g., Colagiuri et al., 2015). For example, anxiety is well known to produce many physical symptoms, including increased heart rate, sweating, or even skin tingling. Notably, social experiences seem to have the biggest impact on our physical health (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017).

When The Emergent Process Begins

At birth, we only have access to our physical experiences (sensations and the 5 senses), so the full model is not yet operational. However, by 18 months of age, we can already predict other people's thoughts to some extent (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997). At about preschool age, our minds have already developed concepts (Malik & Marwaha, 2023), and we begin to record memories (Peterson, 2021). We then continue to

add more and more concepts as we grow, further strengthening this process. So, for most of us, this model is operating from a very young age.

How Awareness Observes This Process

This emergent process creates our experiences from the time we are very young, flowing from **left to right**. However, we can not *directly* observe all of these experiences until we zoom out into the relevant developmental stage. We zoom out from **right to left**. In other words, we can directly observe physical experiences like pain, sensations, and information gained through the 5 senses from the time we are born. In early childhood, we begin to become aware of, and able to directly observe, our social experiences (Flavell, 2004). And as we continue to move through the developmental stages, we can increasingly observe more of our psychological experiences (Cook-Grueter, 2014).

Generally, we become able to directly observe the following experiences in each stage:

Pre-Conventional Stages

- Red: The physical self (1st person perspective); We can observe physical experiences.
- Orange: The social self (2nd person perspective); We can observe social experiences.

Conventional Stages

- Yellow: The agentic self (3rd person perspective); We can observe behaviors.

- Green: The achiever self (Time-expanded 3rd person perspective); We can observe emotions and outcomes.

Post-Conventional Stages

- Teal: The mental self (4th person perspective); We can observe thoughts.
- Blue: The contextual self (Time-expanded 4th person perspective); We can observe beliefs.

Transcendent Stages

- Indigo: The awakened self (5th person perspective); We can observe concepts.
- Violet: No self/full enlightenment (6th person perspective); Awareness observes and deconstructs itself.

By understanding the experiences that we can observe, we can get a pretty good idea of where we are on our path to full enlightenment.

How Experiences Change Throughout Development

When we identify primarily as the agentic self, we can directly observe our behaviors and how they affect our social experiences. In other words, if we yell at a friend, they may become angry—we understand that our behavior has just caused a social experience. A person who is viewing the world from a 1st or 2nd person perspective can not directly observe this causal relationship. You can discover this for yourself by watching a young child. They might steal a toy from a playmate (behavior) without realizing that their

behavior might *cause* the playmate to get mad (*effect* on social experience).

When we identify primarily as the achiever self, we see ourselves as our outcomes. In other words, we are what we can create—and we attempt to create positive emotional experiences for ourselves. We are also able to observe how specific emotions lead to specific actions. However, at this stage, we are not yet able to directly observe the underlying thoughts and beliefs that lead us to have certain emotions rather than others.

When we identify primarily as the mental self, we begin to directly observe our thoughts and perspectives and how they are different from other people's thoughts and perspectives. Prior to identifying with the mental self, we generally can not see that our experience *is* a perspective. For example, prior to this transition, I remember being in arguments with my husband where my sole goal was getting him to understand *my* perspective—*my* perspective felt like the one-and-only truth. After making this transition, it became clear that his perspective was also true. Both his perspective and my perspective were equally valid and they could both be true simultaneously.

When we identify primarily as the contextual self, we begin to directly observe how specific beliefs *cause* specific thoughts (and emotions, and so on) in specific circumstances. For example, if I believe that relationships are dangerous, this may cause thoughts about how others may hurt me, which may cause

emotions of fear when I'm around others, which may cause the behavior of avoiding social interactions. We can also see that this belief is only activated in certain relationships or certain situations. This realization leads us to reidentify as a self who has patterns and changes across contexts.

When we finally see that everything is conceptual, it becomes clear that concepts are socially constructed and that our definitions of concepts create our experiences. As this insight matures, it eventually reaches all of our concepts, including the self-concept, and they all fall apart.

Work With The Earliest Experience You Can Directly Observe

As we move through the developmental stages and our awareness expands, we can directly observe *more* of our psychological experiences. When it comes to moving towards awakening, we generally need to work with the *earliest* experience in the chain that we can *directly* observe.

In other words, see if you can observe and name your specific emotions (a practice referred to as emotional granularity; Tan et al., 2022). If you can do this but it's still difficult to observe the specific thoughts that give rise to specific emotions, then start there. If you can observe the thoughts that give rise to many of your emotions, but you can't figure out which beliefs create these thoughts, then start there. Or, if you can observe

many of your beliefs but don't yet see how concepts create these beliefs, then start there.

If you try to go right to deconstructing concepts without going through each of these steps first, it's often more difficult. You might just get frustrated and quit. But, if you start where you are and apply consistent effort, it may not take that long to get to the point where concepts begin deconstructing themselves and awakening happens spontaneously.

Feedback Loops

It's important to note that there are also feedback loops at every step of this process. A feedback loop is when the output of a process is then routed back into the process to either increase or decrease the effect. A positive feedback loop (or self-reinforcing feedback loop) is a process that occurs which **increases** the effects of a cause. A negative feedback loop is a process that occurs which **decreases** the effects of a cause. We mostly experience positive feedback loops in this process such that experiences later in the chain reinforce (or exacerbate) experiences earlier in the chain.

For example, if we've zoomed out to the point where we can observe behaviors and we have a panic attack, we can only *directly* observe the behavior and later experiences in the causal chain (panicky behavior, panicky social experiences, and panicky bodily sensations). However, the entire chain is causing our experience. The concept of panic *causes* us to form

panicky beliefs, which causes panicky thoughts, then panicky emotions, panicky behaviors, panicky social interactions, and panicky bodily sensations. However, the panicky bodily sensations often trigger *more* panicky thoughts (a positive feedback loop).

When we can't directly observe these panicky concepts, beliefs, or thoughts (because we are not yet in the developmental stage where this occurs), we have a difficult time stopping the panic. Because we can't see the *causes* clearly, it's generally harder to control the feedback loops that strengthen our negative experiences.

Interrupting Feedback Loops

Even if we are not yet able to directly observe the earliest experiences in this process, we can still use our knowledge of this process to decrease our negative experiences. We do this by replacing the positive feedback loops with negative feedback loops.

One way to do this is by engaging in a technique called 'opposite action' (Linehan, 1993). We can use this technique by engaging in the opposite action or behavior to what our emotions seem to be telling us to engage in. For example, if our anxiety is telling us to avoid going to a party, we would instead go to the party. If our anger is telling us to yell at someone, we would instead sit quietly with our emotions. If our craving is telling us to consume alcohol, drugs, or sweets, we could instead not consume those things. Opposite action can be a useful way to interrupt the

link between emotion and behavior and stop the feedback loops that follow.

Exercise: Questioning Beliefs

If you feel ready to go deeper, you can also interrupt feedback loops by questioning some of the beliefs that perpetuate this process. Before beginning this exercise, check in with yourself by asking if you would feel okay if some of your beliefs get threatened. This can sometimes be disorienting if we're not ready for it. If it doesn't feel like a good time, feel free to save this exercise for later.

To do this exercise, ask yourself the questions below and remain open to whatever comes. If you can, stay present in your body and try to just sit with each question and the experience of 'not knowing' the answer. If thoughts start up and won't stop, then simply watch them. Are they defending the belief or trying to keep the belief alive? What do the thoughts want to achieve?

Okay, let's try the exercise.

- Think of an unpleasant social interaction. Is it true that you have to interact with this person in this way? Pause for a moment without answering and just sit with the question.
- Think of one of your habits or behaviors. Is it true that you have to act this way? Pause for a moment without answering and just sit with the question.
- Focus on a specific emotion that arises in a specific

situation. Is it true that you have to feel this emotion? Pause for a moment without answering and just sit with the question.

When you're done, reflect on your experiences doing this exercise. What did it feel like to ask these questions and not answer them? Did you find that your beliefs tried to maintain their existence? Or did they fall away?

The Role of Subtle Physical Sensations

Although the emergent process of psychological experiences (described in this chapter) demonstrates the pathway by which experiences are produced, it only tells part of the story. We have physical experiences at birth, prior to the development of concepts. This suggests that there is something special about physical experiences. For example, we may jump in reaction to a loud noise, feel sick in response to spoiled food, or cry when we need something, even if our mind holds no concepts.

In addition to these instinctual physical responses, research suggests that we also have extremely subtle physical sensations that correspond to our experiences (Zajonc, 1980). In other words, we might have a sensation that comes slightly before we make a decision. Or, we might have a sensation that comes slightly before we form a thought. Or, we might have a sensation that comes slightly before we take a specific action.

Indeed, research has shown that our brain makes a decision *before* we have thoughts about that decision (Smith, 2008). If we can feel the extremely subtle sensations of that slight change in brain chemistry, then the entire process model in this chapter might be viewed as a cascade of extremely subtle sensations that the mind has labeled as different experiences. As we move deeper into awakening, this is exactly what it begins to feel like.

How Awakening Affects This Process

The emergent process of psychological experiences is an extremely useful tool for understanding our experiences and how they arise before awakening. It is also a useful tool for deconstructing and disidentifying from our experiences during the awakening process. Whenever an experience in any part of the causal chain begins dissolving, it affects all the other experiences in the chain.

For example, maybe we stop having the belief that we are worthless. As a result, our thoughts, emotions, actions, social experiences, and physical health issues related to this belief eventually stop arising. As more and more of this process falls apart, we may find ourselves feeling more and more free. Mental and emotional experiences arise less frequently, and all we are left with are the raw physical experiences that we were born with.

Despite the usefulness of this tool, the emergent

process of psychological experiences, itself, begins to fall apart as we move towards full enlightenment. Everything in this chapter refers to the self, and once the self is gone, the concepts in the model stop making sense. None of the labels, models, or maps that anyone uses to describe reality are completely true. They are simply tools we use to move through the four stages of enlightenment. And once full enlightenment arises, we don't need them anymore.

Summary

When we understand how our experiences emerge, we can better understand where we are on our path to awakening and where we are going. These insights can help us better focus on the tasks of our current *developmental* stage so that we can more easily move into the next *developmental* stage. If we work our way up to observing the concepts that give rise to our other experiences, then awakening can happen on its own and we can move through all four stages of enlightenment a lot faster and more easily.

STAGE 1 OF ENLIGHTENMENT

CHAPTER 4

INITIAL AWAKENING

What causes us to enter into the first stage of enlightenment? Well, our 'self' is not really one solid thing (Wilber, 2007). Depending on how nuanced we want to get, our self-concept may be made up of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of parts. For example, we have a physical self, a social self, and a mental self. And our social self includes many smaller parts, such as our kindness, communication, and extroverted characteristics.

These aspects of our self-concept developed differently at different times in our life. So, the many different parts of our self are in different developmental stages (e.g., Schwartz & Sweeny, 2019; Wilber, 2007). For example, we may be excellent at practicing gratitude, okay at communicating with others, and poor at managing our people-pleasing

habits. So, some parts of the self are closer to being ready to awaken than other parts of the self.

When *any* part of the self is 'ripe' to awaken and wakes up, this seems to trigger the first stage of enlightenment. In other words, a part of the self realizes that it is not a real, separate thing. For most people, just a small part of the self awakens while the other parts of the self remain asleep. Working our way through the four stages of enlightenment is then all about helping these other parts of the self catch up. For full enlightenment, no parts of the self can be left behind.

A single part of us can awaken as a result of a meditation practice, use of psychedelic drugs, deep suffering, doing yoga, reading an awakening book, or any other experience. For example, if we doggedly pursue practices that increase awareness—practices like meditation, mindfulness, or self-inquiry—this *may* lead a part of us to awaken sooner. However, these practices sometimes also result in a strengthening of other parts of the self-concept. This can create extra hurdles in the later stages of enlightenment, so there really is no *right* way to wake up. We probably benefit most from just following our intuition and doing whatever feels right for us.

What Might Awakening Look Like?

How we experience this first stage of enlightenment seems to depend on which developmental stage(s) our *non-awake* parts are in. Although awakening could

manifest in any number of ways, we will generally view our awakening through the developmental perspective that the majority of the self-concept is in (e.g., 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th person perspective; see Wilber, 2024 for more).

For example, if a part of us wakes up while the majority of our self-concept remains in the first pre-conventional stage of development (1st person perspective), we're likely to see awakening as something that could only happen to us. We might believe that we, alone, are God or that no other people could possibly be as enlightened as we are.

If a part of us wakes up while the majority of our self-concept remains in the second pre-conventional stage of development (2nd person perspective), we are likely to see awakening as something that is only available to a certain type of person. Perhaps we are dogmatic about what leads to awakening, or we see our spiritual group as special while other groups are wrong, bad, or even evil. It seems that much cult behavior may originate from leaders who have awakenings from a 1st or 2nd person perspective.

If a part of us wakes up while the majority of our self-concept remains in the conventional stages of development (3rd person perspective), we will likely see our awakening through the perspective of the doer or achiever self. People who awaken from this perspective might believe that they are one of the 'chosen ones', that they are special, or that they have an *important* mission. Unfortunately, experiences like

these can be really sticky because not only do we still believe that we are the doer, but we also believe that we can do *special* things that no one else can do. Thus, it can be difficult to see through the concepts and beliefs that keep us stuck here.

If a part of us wakes up while the majority of our self-concept remains in the post-conventional stages of development (4th person perspective), we will likely see awakening through the eyes of our mental self. In other words, we are most strongly identified with the mind. People who awaken from this perspective may take on lots of new thoughts, beliefs, and concepts in an effort to analyze and understand the reality that they have just awoken to. Mental experiences like these can be somewhat sticky—for example, we can get attached to exploring many different spiritual concepts. Luckily, our focus on taking in new information and hearing new perspectives can often keep us moving forward, as long as we remain open to the possibility that our new beliefs and perspectives are not what we think they are.

If a part of us wakes up while the majority of our self-concept is in the first transcendent stage of development (5th person perspective), most parts of our self will already be ripe and ready to deconstruct themselves. So, we are more likely to move through the four stages of enlightenment relatively easily and quickly.

My Initial Awakening Experience

The first part of my self-concept to awaken was my emotional self. This isn't really surprising because it is common for us to awaken through a part of ourselves that is very mature (e.g., Wilber, 2007). After spending my M.A. and Ph.D. in an emotion research lab and then building a career in emotion and positive psychology, this was likely the most mature part of myself.

After reading *The Power of Now*, I spontaneously realized that the concepts of guilt and forgiveness did not exist because there is no separate self to be forgiven. This triggered the awakening process for me, and I entered the first stage of enlightenment.

When I first woke up, many of my parts were still in earlier stages. Those unawake parts of myself interpreted the awakening experience using the perspective of their stage. For example, a few parts of myself perceived awakening as something that made me special (3rd person perspective), and other parts of me wanted to learn about all the theories of awakening (4th person perspective). Because parts of us are in different developmental stages, these mixed perspectives about awakening are very common in the first stage of enlightenment.

We Can't Leave Parts of The Self Behind

The parts of the self that remain in earlier developmental stages are not quite ready to realize their own lack of separate existence. And that's okay. Simply try to think of these parts like they are children. These parts of us just need our support and

understanding to grow, mature, and catch up. Internal Family Systems therapy, which teaches this skill, can be very helpful at this stage.

Example of Working With Parts

Let's imagine that our anger is still reacting to perceived threats against our physical, social, or agentic self—*that guy just cut me off in traffic; he needs to get his butt kicked*, we might think. The angry part of us clearly still believes it needs to exist so that it can protect us.

To help these parts of us catch up, we first need to acknowledge their perspective. For example, a mature part of you can empathize with the angry part and understand why it is angry. Once the angry part of us feels heard and understood, it will start to reveal the concepts, beliefs, and thoughts that are tied into it.

For example, we might discover—*I am angry that other people don't seem to care about each other*. From this, we can see that we have the belief—*people don't care about each other.* If we keep digging, we can usually find a belief that relates to the self—*people don't care about <u>me</u>*. Once we find the underlying beliefs, we can sit with them as they are, witness the patterns that they create, and eventually see through them entirely.

If we maintain this gentle, compassionate curiosity about each of our parts, they will slowly move into our awareness. In awareness, we simply acknowledge, experience, and accept them, enabling them to mature. In other words, they become ready to awaken and

realize they don't need to exist in their current form. Then, they can reintegrate into the nondual everythingness that is reality.

Common Experiences

In the first stage of enlightenment, some parts of the self-concept dissolve. Very often, the self-concept interprets this as a threat to its existence. It then reacts by *strengthening* the remaining parts and *adding* a bunch of new parts.

For example, it is not uncommon at the first stage of enlightenment to begin having channeling, psychic, clairvoyant, or other 'mystical' experiences. These experiences can be incredible gifts, but we have to be careful not to identify with these experiences by labeling them as "me" or "mine". If we attach to (or avoid) these experiences, we're likely to get stuck (Sayadaw, 2016). So, we need to be sure that we neither seek out these experiences nor push them away. We just allow them to arise (or not), just like we allow the wind to blow or the rain to fall.

At this stage, we are also still unconsciously projecting our remaining shadow parts (or the unacknowledged aspects of the self) onto our experiences. We now do this with regular experiences *and* mystical experiences. For example, if we are unable to acknowledge, experience, and own our innate power, we might have interactions with what appear to be powerful beings such as angels, ETs, ascended masters, or spirit guides. Or, if we are unable to acknowledge, experience, and

own our hate or cruelty, we might find ourselves having scary interactions with what appear to be demons or evil entities. Depending on our unique shadow parts, these projections could play out in any number of ways.

Now, there is nothing wrong with any of these experiences. These experiences are no different than other "normal" experiences. But, if we really *do* desire to move beyond suffering—and it's okay if we don't—we simply need to remember that no experience will make us permanently happy. By remaining aware and nonattached, we can learn a ton from these experiences and keep moving forward. Once we have learned what we need to learn, these experiences generally don't arise much anymore. It might even feel like when we outgrow a childhood friend. They move on and we move on, and it's all completely fine.

Mistaken Enlightenment

Once we enter the first stage of enlightenment, our insights begin clarifying themselves (e.g., Ingram, 2018; Wikipedia, 2025, March 10). So, it is not uncommon, even at earlier developmental stages, to have significant realizations about emptiness, fullness, oneness, and nonduality (Wilber, 2024). If we can see that everything we are aware of is not separate from us, it might *seem* like we're fully enlightened.

However, we can only see that we are not separate from experiences that we are aware of (e.g., Wilber,

2007). If we are not yet aware that *all* beliefs and concepts are illusions, then we'll still be identified with subtle beliefs and concepts that are still outside of our awareness. In fact, many so-called enlightened teachers maintain that some beliefs and concepts are real. However, in full enlightenment, it is obvious that 'no thing' is real—no idea, no concept, no beliefs, nothing (e.g., Parsons, 2000). In order to see this clearly, we need to be in the *developmental* stage where we can see through concepts (5th person perspective). Thus, full enlightenment—and the seeing through of conceptual reality—requires that we transcend all of the *developmental* stages **and** all of the *enlightenment* stages (Wilber, 2007).

Identifying Full Enlightenment

It can be really difficult to tell whether our (or someone's else's) enlightenment is complete or not. One giveaway is that not-fully enlightened folks will still believe that they have some sort of a self. They may talk about spiritual concepts, beliefs, powers, or their identity as an awake, enlightened, aware, or expansive Self.

Full enlightenment has nothing to do with the self, experiences, or even spirituality. Although fully enlightened teachers will still inevitably have to use concepts and normal language to speak, they will generally remind us that they are *not* special and that concepts, words, and the self are not real (e.g., Parsons, 2000).

Summary

Awakening is like a kaleidoscope with a near-infinite number of experiences. One of the things that creates this diversity of experiences is the fact that different parts of us awaken at different times. Any part of the self can wake up, but most of us will still have parts that are still asleep. Thus, the first stage of enlightenment is often an exciting stage with a lot of possibilities.

CHAPTER 5

EMOTIONAL PROCESSING

Once we are awake (and sometimes before we awaken), awareness will begin to observe old emotional pain, trauma, shadow parts, and anything else that we've suppressed or repressed (e.g., Dilullo, 2021). This process happens outside of our control, completely on its own. So, the less we fight it, the easier it is likely to be.

Some of us may have relatively little emotional processing to do; others of us will have a lot. For some, emotional processing will happen all at once; for others, it will happen over a longer period of time. For many of us, this can be the most difficult part of awakening. On the bright side, once our heaviest emotions have been processed and our deepest trauma has been released, we feel so much better. Often, we even end up deeply grateful for the whole process.

Emotional Pain

Although we may have heard that awakening is a process that leads to peace and bliss, we are far less likely to have been told that to get to this point, we first need to actually *feel* all of the pain we still hold. We do this by acknowledging, experiencing, and accepting *everything*.

In the past, we were unable to fully acknowledge, experience, and accept our emotions. And this makes complete sense. Much of our deepest traumas occurred when we were children, when we were incapable of making sense of situations and handling the intensity of our emotional challenges. Although this is a completely normal and even adaptive response when we are young, we're now adults who carry immense amounts of pain around with us at every moment.

If we want to stay where we are, that's up to us. No one is required to become enlightened. But if we want to move all the way through the four stages of enlightenment and past suffering, it requires that we face the emotions that we have spent our entire lives avoiding. This emotional pain must be fully acknowledged and experienced in the body in order to release it (e.g., Schubiner & Betzold, 2010).

Importantly, we don't need to recount traumatic stories or bring memories of traumatic experiences to mind. We just need to acknowledge, experience, and eventually accept the *bodily sensations* of any buried

sadness, anger, disappointment, loneliness, fear, shame, guilt, and other subtle emotions. Once we experience these sensations fully, they release. This is how facing our repressed pain sets us free.

Strategies for Emotional Release

Emotional journaling can be an effective way to acknowledge many of our emotions (Pennebaker, 1997). Especially if you are someone who has physical pain in the body, emotional journaling has been proven to be a very effective tool (e.g., Schubiner & Betzold, 2010). However, some of our emotional pain was created in early childhood before we developed mental capacities such as memory or thought. Because we can't focus on the mental or emotional aspects of these experiences, it's difficult to release them through exploration tactics like journaling.

Emotional pain and patterns may have also formed in the womb (Provençal & Binder, 2015), possibly due to the dietary, emotional, or behavioral patterns of our mother. We even inherit experiences that our parents had earlier in their lives through changes in DNA (Skvortsova et al., 2018; Yehuda, 2022). This science helps us understand why we can have emotional pain and trauma in our bodies that we can't explain.

So, some of the emotions that remain trapped in our bodies may need to be released through physical means. We may want to release anger by going to a 'break room' or 'rage room'—a place where we can smash objects. Or, we could go into the woods and scream at the top of our lungs. Another useful way to

release preverbal psychological pain is using neurodynamic or holotropic breathwork. These techniques help you access and release pain without having to know where it is coming from.

Exercise: Emotional Release Meditation

To get started with this work, let's do an exercise. For this exercise, please set aside 20 minutes and find a space where you can be alone. If you don't have time or privacy to do this exercise right now, come back to it later.

If you are ready to continue, let's start the exercise now.

Begin by thinking of a small pain or trauma that you still hold onto. For example, maybe you're still mad at a childhood friend for something they did decades ago. Or, maybe you're still grieving the loss of a family pet. Once you have an experience in mind, execute the following steps.

1. **First, get into your body.** Start by tightening the muscles in your hands by making a fist, then tighten the muscles in your arms, then tighten the muscles in your legs, then give yourself a big hug, squeezing your entire body. Take a few deep breaths while you continue to hug yourself.
2. **Next, think of the situation which upset you in the past.** Bring to mind the experience, how it felt in your body, and what emotions you felt. Allow

these emotions to come up in your body and feel them with all of your senses, as much as you can.

3. **Scan your body to observe as many sensations as you can.** Perhaps you feel tingling, heat, clenching, pressure, vibrations, or other sensations. Scan your entire body, and note every sensation you find, naming each sensation as you notice it.
4. **Let your body experience whatever it wants to experience.** If it wants to hit a pillow, scream, or cry, let it. It's trying to experience the emotion so that it can move out of the body, and we often stop it from doing so. Allow the emotions to move and release in a safe way (for example, hit a pillow instead of yourself or others).
5. **Express love to yourself for being brave enough to experience these emotions.** For each difficult emotion, send your love to it while accepting its existence so that it can finally move on.
6. **Listen to your body to see if you can gain any deeper wisdom from the emotions.** Are your emotions trying to tell you to take better care of yourself or to accept yourself more? If these emotions were to speak, what would they say? Quiet your mind and see if any insights emerge that can help and support you.
7. **Visualize the empty space where the emotions used to be in your body.** Perhaps you see the emotions flowing out of your feet like water into the ground. Or perhaps you see them as whisps of smoke, zooming out of your chest into the air. Try to imagine some sort of visual representation of the emotions leaving your body.

After you complete this exercise, you may notice tingling sensations, muscle twitching or shaking, or even stiff hands. It may be disconcerting if your body or limbs start to twitch, but this is actually a sign that your body is releasing trauma. For example, in breathwork, the experience of tetany (or muscle cramps) is well noted (Ginzburg, n.d.). Shaking, twitching, and tingling are also really common when releasing trauma through psychotherapeutic techniques such as somatic therapy (Levine, 2008). Animals also experience intense shaking immediately after undergoing trauma to release it from their bodies. If we simply let the body do what it wants to do, then the trauma can be released.

Shadow Parts

Shadow parts form when we repress or suppress parts of ourselves—usually because those parts of ourselves weren't accepted by others in our early-life environment. For example, if we were a very shy kid, we may have repeatedly been told to be more outgoing or extroverted. This may have led us to engage in social behaviors that didn't actually feel good to us. On the flip side, if we were a very outgoing kid, we may have repeatedly been told to calm down or be quiet. This may have led us to silence ourselves and hold back from expressing ourselves in the ways we really wanted to. These are just two ways (from an infinite number of examples) that we may have developed shadow parts.

Regardless of what our upbringing was, we all have aspects of our self-concept that we have not fully owned or experienced. These 'shadow parts' are like children inside our minds, constantly tugging at our pant legs and sometimes screaming, "Pay attention to me!" Each of these parts of ourselves operates differently in different situations. As Schwartz & Sweeny (2019) say, "It is as if we each contain a society of people, each of whom is at a different age and has different interests, talents, and temperaments." Acknowledging, accepting, and integrating these shadow parts seems to be one of the major tasks that needs to be tackled during the first stage of enlightenment.

Toxic Mental Habits

Even after we enter the first stage of enlightenment, we still maintain a lot of dysfunctional patterns. Learning more about the following toxic mental habits can help us begin to resolve them and the patterns that continue to play out.

Denial

Denial is refusing to accept the reality or truth of a situation. It protects us from something that the mind thinks it can't cope with. When we begin to look at our emotional pain, we are very likely to hit up against denial (but we often won't realize it until after we've already broken through).

One good way to see through denial may be to ask a trusted friend, family member, or therapist to point out

your denial to you. Often, the things we are in denial about are blatantly obvious to other people around us. For example, others may notice that we always veer away from a certain conversation, tell ourselves something that doesn't appear to be true, or refuse to admit we have a problem with something like an addiction. If we are willing to genuinely listen to what others say and then look inward to see if there is any truth to it, we may be able to uproot the denial that keeps us stuck.

Projection

Projection involves attributing our own thoughts, feelings, or impulses to others. For example, we may be especially bothered by people who are selfish, weak, or angry. These people may, in fact, be the way we see them (or they may not). But the fact that we are *bothered* by these people indicates that we are projecting our thoughts onto them.

To begin to see through projection, we look for the personality traits, characteristics, and behaviors that we find to be most annoying in others. These characteristics point to the aspects of ourselves that are the most imbalanced. In other words, we are disowning one side or the other of a duality. For example, if we are annoyed by someone who is selfish, we are either disowning the selfish part of us or the unselfish part of us. To correct the imbalance, we simply need to allow and accept whatever we've been disowning (yes, it's actually okay if we're selfish sometimes!)

Rationalization

Rationalization involves providing logical or reasonable explanations for our behaviors. When we do this, we have a limited understanding of the true causes of our behaviors. Anytime we justify our behavior, we are rationalizing.

To see through rationalization, pay attention any time you provide any reason for any action. This includes both 'big' reasons and 'small' reasons. For example, we may tell ourselves we go to the gym because we want to be healthy. We actually *believe* that this is the real reason for our actions. But, when we look inward, we begin to see that there are lots of reasons. Maybe we feel insecure about our body. Maybe we want to get away from our kids and spouse. Or, maybe we are just bored and trying to fill the time.

Once we begin to better understand our 'reasons', it becomes easier to break these cause-and-effect patterns and take action more freely.

Body Toxicity

In addition to clearing our minds of all the old gunk, some of us must also clean our bodies. It is not uncommon to develop illnesses, food allergies, or other health problems during awakening. If we have these experiences, we should first consult a medical professional. Medical care may, in fact, be needed. However, usually, the message is to simply bring more awareness to our bodies so that we can discover what our unique body actually needs.

Importantly, the answers to what our body needs do not lie outside of us—we don't need to follow someone else's strict diet or exercise routine. Rather, our unique bodily or health issues are trying to tell us about our own unique needs. So we have to learn how to listen to our bodies.

When it comes to diet, some of us may discover we need to eat *more* meat; some of us may need to eat *less* meat. Some people may become intolerant to common allergens like dairy or wheat; some of us may need to stop eating seemingly healthy foods like grapefruit or broccoli. Still others may need to avoid anything that harms the body—for example alcohol, caffeine, sugar, vegetable oils, preservatives, etc... I can't tell you what your body needs; only you have that information.

When it comes to our activity, we also have our own unique needs. You may need more sleep, less sleep, more exercise, or less exercise. It can also be helpful to explore how your body feels when spending time outdoors, immersed in water, in hot or cold climates, and when spending time with people versus alone. Once you gain deeper awareness of your body, it'll tell you exactly what it has been lacking all these years.

Balancing Polarities In The Body

I personally struggled with a lot of health issues throughout awakening—chronic pain, headaches, digestive issues, food allergies, exhaustion, and more. By paying attention to how my body felt, I had identified pretty much all of the foods and exercises

that it didn't like. However, I still didn't understand what foods my body needed to heal.

I felt like I had tried everything, but then I discovered Ayurveda, a system of medicine based on balancing polarities in the body and mind. The 10 aspects that Ayurveda claims need to be balanced are hot/cold, dry/oily, heavy/light, rough/smooth, static/mobile, liquid/dense, gross/subtle, sharp/dull, soft/hard, and cloudy/clear. For some, balancing these polarities may be another thing that needs to be done to progress.

Toxic Relationships

As we continue to move forward, we'll also have to look at our relationships. Have we been tolerating any abusive or toxic relationships? Do we have family members who we can't be ourselves around? Do we have friends who manipulate us? Do we have any narcissists who are zapping our life energy? Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges of our early awakening work is to be honest with ourselves about our relationships and let go of the ones that aren't fixable.

Toxic Relationship Example

Having been raised by divorced narcissistic parents, much of my trauma work involved simply acknowledging my feelings about being gaslit and neglected for much of my life. Prior to this point, I had been in complete denial about my experiences; they were simply too painful. But at this point, I joined a

support group and talked about my traumatic childhood experiences for the first time.

As my self-confidence grew, I began to set boundaries with everyone in my life. Some of my relationships got stronger. However, because narcissists can not tolerate anyone else's needs, this attempt failed miserably with my parents. My father blew up in a rage and hasn't spoken to me since. My mother simply ignored me, and because she didn't want to hear my truth or adhere to my boundaries, we barely speak at all anymore.

Although losing these key relationships was one of the hardest things I experienced, it is also, in retrospect, one of the experiences that I am most grateful for. It wasn't until my parents were out of my life that I finally began to heal my deepest wounds.

The Benefits of Psychological Skills

Although we may want to hurry through the four stages of enlightenment, if we have not yet adequately mastered the developmental tasks of earlier developmental stages, we are almost certain to face additional challenges throughout this process. To more easily navigate the awakening process, we are best served by getting our 'psychological ducks' in a row as early as possible. Ideally, we develop helpful psychological skills from each of the earlier developmental stages to better prepare us for awakening.

For example, moving through all four stages of enlightenment often requires that we have basic self-care and grounding skills (1st person skills), supportive social relationships (2nd person skills), a healthy sense of power, agency, and persistence (3rd person skills), the ability to see different perspectives and patterns (4th person skills), and the ability to deconstruct concepts (5th person skills). Now, none of us will have a perfect psychological toolkit, but the fewer of these skills we have mastered, the more difficult awakening is likely to be.

Grab my free *Path to Well-Being* book to build these skills: berkeleywellbeing.com/path-to-well-being-book

Summary

Emotional processing is often the least enjoyable part of the awakening journey. And if we still have a lot of emotional processing to do, it can take a while. Try to remember, this is a process. As such, we may flash on insights, resolve big things that kept us trapped, and then need to take some time to rest and recuperate. So rest when you need to. And, if you need help, please seek it out from a trauma therapist, Internal Family Systems practitioner, Ayurvedic coach, friend, family member, or support group.

CHAPTER 6

SEEING THROUGH LIMITATIONS

Another task in the first stage of enlightenment is moving beyond conventional rules and realizing that we can autonomously make choices about who we want to be and the life we want to live. Although we have likely moved beyond many conventional rules and roles by this point—for example, we may not buy into the messages of conventional society or religion—we are still confined by internalized rules of our own making. These internal rules (or beliefs) tell us that we aren't allowed to live our lives the way we want to.

For example, maybe we still believe that we need to make everybody happy, that we need to pursue a particular career, or that we have to engage in particular socially-approved activities. The 'rules' that we have created for ourselves are more subtle than conventional or societal rules, but we are bound by them nonetheless. Thus, moving forward at this point

requires we look honestly at our beliefs, our patterns, the stories we hold on to, our rules, and anything else that limits our natural expression and authenticity.

Stories

Stories are what we tell ourselves about ourselves. For example, our story may be that we grew up poor and had to overcome many challenges to get where we are. Or, we may have a story about a tragedy we faced as a child that makes us who we are today. Or, our story may be that we have a happy, healthy family (even if everyone in the family is actually miserable).

Although stories originate from actual experiences, they are made up of a mixture of beliefs, thoughts, and emotions. As our beliefs begin to change or dissolve, our stories can start to fall apart. We may start to realize that, yes, we did face a tragedy as a child, but our repeated thoughts about that tragedy are what's creating our suffering. Or, we may realize that our story of a happy family keeps us from acknowledging our family members' real feelings.

Once we see our stories clearly, they begin to dissolve. In other words, we see that they are just self-made creations and not an accurate reflection of reality. It can be difficult to realize how our stories kept us locked in less-than-desirable patterns, but once we move through the pain of that realization, we understand that we no longer have to live by our stories, and we become free from the rules that our stories create.

Exercise: Examine The Stories You Hold

Grab a pen and piece of paper or open a Word document and write down the answers to the following questions.

- What are the overarching themes of your life?
- What stories or experiences do you repeatedly tell others about?
- If you wrote a memoir, what would be the plot?
- Now, see if you can identify the beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that make up the stories you identified in the previous questions.
- Now, ask yourself, are these beliefs, thoughts, and emotions true? Is the story true? Or could someone with a different perspective argue that the story is something different?

By exploring and deconstructing the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, we begin to see that although our experiences happened, the stories we created about these experiences were made up—they were just our minds' way of making sense of the world. In other words, stories are just a perspective.

Roles

Roles are like stories that other people have created for us. For example, our parents might cast us in the role of 'the responsible one' who makes sure everyone else is taken care of. Or, our friends might cast us in the

role of 'the good listener' who is always there to empathize with their problems. Or, our romantic partner might cast us in the role of 'the rock' who never gets ruffled when others get upset or chaotic.

Like stories, roles originate from actual social experiences. We, and the other people involved, felt comfortable in, drawn to, or forced into a particular role in particular social situations. We then turn a mixture of beliefs, thoughts, and emotions into roles that we play when we are with certain people. The longer we know someone, the more solidified these roles become, and the more these roles become a part of our self-concept.

As we awaken and the self-concept begins to dissolve, any roles we play that feel inauthentic become more and more uncomfortable. As the beliefs that maintain these roles begin to shift, our thoughts begin to shift too—"Why am I doing this?!" we might ask ourselves. Then our emotions shift as well—"Ouch, I don't like how this interaction feels." And finally, our behavior shifts—we do something that is 'out of character' or not part of the role that we are expected to play.

For example, if we are cast as 'the responsible one', we might stop providing help or showing up for every little thing that others need help with. If we are cast as 'the good listener', we might request that future discussions be closer to 50-50, with each person sharing about half of the time. Or, we might simply say, "Hey, I don't really feel like having interactions like this anymore." The actions that emerge will more closely reflect how

we truly want to experience and express ourselves in the world.

Although this is a positive sign of progress, the people you interact with may respond in a variety of ways, and you'll have no control over their responses. In some cases, the other person may adapt easily and just agree to play the new, more flexible roles with you.

More often, the other person will be perturbed when you stop playing your role. Your change in behavior requires them to change their behavior too. Because they have defined themselves as their roles (just as you did), this shakes their identity as they are forced to think of themselves in a new way.

Many people will just need some time to adjust to the 'new you' and the 'new them'. Unfortunately, some people will not be able to make the shift with you. Generally, these are the people that are not yet able to see that you have your own beliefs and perspectives. So, it's difficult for them to understand and tolerate your actions—actions that don't feel good or make sense to them.

Other folks may interpret your desire for new roles as an all-out attack on them. People who have not yet done much psychological work may still rely on coping skills that are highly toxic. Things like passive aggression, lying, manipulation, guilt-tripping, stonewalling, giving the silent treatment, avoidance, aggression, and other abusive behaviors may emerge simply because these people don't know any other way

to cope with a new role (and the feeling of an unstable identity that goes with it). They may even blame you for creating this icky feeling inside of themselves. If your shifting sense of self is too threatening to someone else's sense of self, the relationship may become increasingly dysfunctional and fall apart.

While this may be hard for you, try to remember that this may be even harder for others. A dissolving self-concept is something that you are at least somewhat ready to handle in the first stage of enlightenment. But this kind of experience can be extremely scary and painful for those who are not yet developmentally ready for it. So, as this plays out, try to hold as much compassion for yourself and others as possible.

Exercise: Examine The Roles You Play

Grab a pen and piece of paper or open a Word document and write down the answers to the following questions.

- Start by thinking about each person in your immediate social circle (i.e., family, close friends, partners, close coworkers, etc...). For each person, see if you can describe the role (or roles) you play with them and the role they play with you.
- Next, explore whether there are any parts of these roles that you don't want to play anymore. For example, maybe your friend is playing the role of 'needy friend' and you are playing the role of 'savior friend' but you don't like this anymore.

- Ask yourself, in which situations do you want to keep playing the role and in which situations do you want to do something different?
- What beliefs prevent you from going outside of your current roles? For example, with regard to a needy friend, might your belief that you don't matter lead you to play savior-type roles so that you feel like you matter more?
- Now, how might you let go of the beliefs that maintain your roles?

By exploring and deconstructing the roles we play with others, we allow ourselves to interact more freely and be more of who we want to be. This helps us declutter our minds and more easily move through the awakening process.

Self-Created Rules

Self-created rules are the boundaries and limitations we create for ourselves. We might create these from stories or roles, or we might create them from other mixtures of beliefs, thoughts, and emotions. For example, we may have a rule that 'we must do what we say we're going to do'. So, even if we change our minds or realize we don't want to do something, we follow through. Self-created rules are enforced **internally**—we might shame or criticize ourselves for not following our own rules.

In our earlier development, rules like this can actually be quite helpful. They might help us to be more successful in our relationships and at work. However,

during awakening, we can begin to let go of our self-created rules or choose *when* we want to follow certain self-created rules.

To do this, we first need to identify the rules we have created for ourselves. Here are a few basic examples:

- I have to be nice.
- I can't pursue my passion.
- I have to spend time with certain people.

Remember, beliefs lead to thoughts, emotions, and actions. So, anytime we feel like we have to take a certain action, it's because we have a certain belief. In this case, we have a belief that a certain rule is real and not just made up in our own minds. One way to deconstruct some of our self-created rules is by looking at the actions we engage in that we don't enjoy.

Exercise: Examine Your Self-Created Rules

Grab a pen and piece of paper or open a Word document and write down the answers to the following questions.

- Start by investigating how the roles you play create rules. Think of one or two of the roles you play with different people, and list the things you **can not do** while playing each role. For example, what do you believe you can't do because you're a mom, or because you're a 'good' friend?

- Now, list every action you take, anywhere in your life, that you don't want to take. Then see if you can figure out which belief is telling you that you have to take each action.
- Now, list every action you **don't** take that you actually **do** want to take. Then see if you can figure out which belief is telling you that you **can't** take that action.

At this point, it's important to note that actions *do* have consequences. Societal rules do exist. However, when we start investigating the internal rules we set for ourselves, we'll eventually discover tons of other **imaginary** rules. We can then explore them further to see if the consequences that we imagine are actually true.

- So, ask yourself, what do you think the consequences are for breaking your **internal** rules?
- Where do you think the belief in these consequences came from? (Hint, they often had *real* consequences in childhood.)
- Now, how might you shift or rewrite these beliefs in ways that allow you to have fewer self-created rules?

By exploring and deconstructing the rules we set for ourselves, we allow ourselves more freedom. And as a result, we allow ourselves the space to move deeper into awakening.

Self-Created Conflict

At some point, we begin to discover that our conflict with others is actually a projection of the conflict we have within us. In other words, people are like mirrors—they reflect back to us how we already feel about ourselves. I'm not saying that other people are literal reflections of us. Other people have their own experiences too. What I mean is that our *reactions* to others reveal *hidden* aspects of ourselves.

For example, you may be actively rejecting John—avoiding him, ignoring him, and stonewalling him. If you're not aware of this, it may actually seem to you like John is the one rejecting you. In other words, how we experience other people is a reflection of our own hidden or disowned beliefs, thoughts, emotions, actions, and physical experiences.

Being a Mirror for Others

We are also a mirror for others. This means that others project their inner experiences onto us. They can get mad at us for all kinds of things that have nothing to do with us. Prior to awakening, we will likely respond to other peoples' projections with our own projections. They may blame us; we then blame them back. They judge us; we then judge them back, and so on.

The deeper into awakening we move, the more obvious these projections become. For example, one time a woman got really upset about something I wrote. She called me egotistical, judgmental, and unkind. Do you see how she was doing exactly what she was claiming I did? She was being egotistical, judgmental, and unkind through her words, yet she

believed that I was the one doing this. Whether my writing had these characteristics or not is irrelevant.

Although I saw her projection, I was not yet a completely clear mirror, so I projected back to her how I felt about myself. I responded in a submissive way, agreeing that she probably knew better than I did. So my belief that I was "not good enough" made me feel like I wasn't good enough. In truth, there was nothing real for either of us to be upset about. We were both just reacting to our own inner experiences.

Seeing Both Sides of the Mirror

We have to be careful with how we use mirrors. If we always view **others as a mirror**, we may end up blaming ourselves for everything—we may think that if there is a conflict, it must be because of something inside of *us*. But if we always view **ourselves as a mirror** for others, we may end up blaming other people for everything—we may think that if something goes wrong, it must be because of something inside of *them*.

These one-sided mirrors can sometimes be used by spiritual groups or cults to manipulate people into ignoring abuse. For example, a leader might call themselves a clear mirror and avoid taking responsibility for any distress they cause to their followers. Thus, the best use of the mirror insight is to use our negative social experiences as an opportunity to ask ourselves: "Is this about me, is this about you, or is it both?" By doing this, we can recognize our own destructive mental patterns as well as the destructive

mental patterns of others.

Exercise: Practice Using Mirrors

Grab a pen and piece of paper or open a Word document and write down the answers to the following questions.

- Start by thinking about a recent fight you had with someone. Once you have a fight in mind, see if you can identify the beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that led you to get upset. Try not to focus on what the other person did—focus on how *you* felt about what they did, and try to identify what beliefs you have that made you feel this way.
- Now think about the other person. What do you think *they* felt? What beliefs must they have had in order to feel the things they felt?
- Lastly, reflect on how you might be able to bring these insights into your next conflict. For example, you could share how their behavior triggered your beliefs. And you could ask them what beliefs were triggered for them.

Once you get this down, you'll find that conflicts are much easier to manage. You can actually see projections happening in real time. If you're the one projecting your internal experience onto someone else, you can pause the fight and reflect on what's happening inside of you. And if another person is projecting on you, you can ask that they go figure out what's really going on with them. Usually, both people have inner work to do.

As our awakening deepens, we become a clearer mirror for others. We find ourselves truly understanding the children's saying, "I'm rubber and you're glue. Anything you say bounces off me and sticks to you." This occurs because we no longer react to others' projections. The conflict no longer escalates in the predictable way, and this forces the other person to look inward. Sometimes, the inner experiences are so uncomfortable for others that they amp up their blame and/or look for other targets. However, if they have the psychological skills to deal with their own uncomfortable feelings, a clear mirror (someone in the fourth stage of enlightenment) can help them begin to see, acknowledge, experience, and accept whatever they've hidden from themselves.

Summary

Although this can be difficult work, its ultimate purpose is to provide us with more freedom. As we break free from our self-made confines, we'll find life to be less limiting and restrictive. As a result, we can experience more of what life has to offer and hopefully, continue making our way through the awakening process.

CHAPTER 7

WITNESSING AWARENESS

At some point in early awakening, it becomes easier to look at life from the perspective of our "witnessing" awareness (e.g., Wilber, 2024). Think of it like this. You know when you're watching a movie and you get so sucked in that you forget yourself—you're no longer paying any attention to the room that you are watching the movie from.

Prior to awakening, you were completely sucked into the movie of life. Now, it's like a scene of the movie ended, and you zoom out. You are now observing both the room that you're in and the movie that's playing. It's kind of like that. You zoom out from your life just a little bit and realize, "Oh, I can look at my life from an outside perspective."

After we zoom out into the perspective of awareness, we realize that we can not possibly be any of the

experiences that we observe because we are observing them. We are here and experiences are there. So, we begin to disidentify from our experiences.

Still, for a while, we frequently get re-absorbed in the movie of our life, especially when things are intense. In other words, we temporarily reidentify with our beliefs, thoughts, emotions, actions, and experiences. But then, when our mind settles back down, we zoom back out into the perspective of awareness.

Witnessing Thoughts

The first thing we usually notice from the perspective of awareness is our thoughts. We begin to watch the parades of thoughts—some of them completely insane—constantly running through our minds. We will eventually conclude that we are not our minds. How can we be? We now watch thoughts go and go and go without any ability to stop or change them.

Loud Thoughts

As we start to observe our thoughts, we'll likely notice the loudest thoughts first. Depending on our unique mind, we may notice a loud inner critic, a loud inner anger, a loud inner control freak, and/or a variety of other inner voices. Some of these inner voices may egg each other on, while other voices argue with each other (e.g., Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019). If we still have a lot of emotional work to do, our new awareness of

these thoughts can be quite distressing. We previously had no idea how insane our thoughts really are.

Quiet Thoughts

Once we have acknowledged and accepted most of our louder thoughts, we'll begin to notice quieter thoughts. For example, we may notice the mind's tendency to rehearse what it's going to say—a process known as mental rehearsal (e.g., Cisek & Kalaska, 2004). The mind is always looking for potential problems in the future, so it will often practice what it wants to say in difficult conversations, in situations with potential romantic partners, or even in casual conversations with friends. It may even repeat the same sentences or phrases over and over again, just to hear how they sound. Because we are now seeing our thoughts from the perspective of awareness, we just watch them. As we do, it becomes more and more clear that they can't possibly be what we are.

Exercise: Witnessing Thoughts

In this meditation exercise, practice watching your thoughts.

- To begin, take a deep breath in, and then exhale as you begin to become more present in your body.
- Now, begin observing the thoughts that pop into your mind. Notice which thoughts come up and see if you can follow them as they travel in different directions.
- Wait 30 seconds.

- Where are your thoughts now? Pause to observe them. Notice how close or far these thoughts are from where the thoughts started.
- Wait 30 seconds.
- Notice the thoughts you're having at this very moment. What are you thinking about now, and how far away is it from the thoughts you were having the last time that you checked in?
- Wait 30 seconds.
- Ask yourself: Is your mind empty of thought or are you still thinking of something? Did you choose the thought? Or, did the thought just arise?
- Take another deep breath and finish this meditation.
- Take a moment now to reflect on your experience. Ask yourself the following questions:
- What thoughts did you have? How did thoughts flow from one thought to the next?
- Did you have any control over your thoughts or did they just seem to appear?
- Did you feel like the thoughts were you, or did it feel like you were somewhere else, watching your thoughts?

By continuing to witness your thoughts in this way, your thought patterns will become more clear to you.

Very Quiet Thoughts

One of the things that really surprised me was that thoughts don't necessarily need to be made of words that run through our minds. Thoughts can also be mental images or wordless mental processes. For

example, if you close your eyes and imagine a beautiful, relaxing beach, that is a thought—it's a thought in the form of an image instead of the form of a word.

Other thoughts seem to be nonverbal—that is, they formed in our minds before we were old enough to understand language. For example, there seem to be nonverbal thoughts around very early life experiences such as hunger, cold, or safety. Perhaps these thoughts could also be called instincts. It doesn't really matter what we call them; we just need to witness them with our awareness so that we see through them.

Quiet Thoughts Example

As an example, I am someone who feels cold really easily. Although there are some biological reasons for this—I have low blood pressure, for instance—nonverbal thoughts also affect this experience. If I hold my husband's hand and our hands are the same temperature, I often say that my hand feels cold and he says his hand feels warm. This led me to question, "Am I actually cold, or do I just *think* that I'm cold?"

To investigate this question further, I started wearing fewer sweaters when I went on winter walks. I would then focus on the cold sensation itself, trying not to let my concepts, definitions, or thoughts of cold affect the experience. Indeed, I discovered that I'm not as cold as I thought I was. Cold is just a thought. But because being able to identify cold (or hunger or safety) is essential for survival, even before we learn language,

the thought (or mental activity) seems to exist in a nonverbal form.

Witnessing Emotions

For many of us, it is more difficult to witness emotions from the expanded perspective of awareness than it is to witness thoughts from this perspective. We may find ourselves completely identified with our emotional experiences, especially if an emotion is strong. It's just like watching an intense movie—we are most sucked in during the intense or emotional scenes. Once the emotion has exhausted itself and the mind settles down, we'll zoom back out into the perspective of awareness.

When we are just beginning to witness our emotions, it can be helpful to reflect or journal about our immediate emotional experiences. Whenever we get sucked into an emotion, we are identifying with that emotion. When we zoom back out and remember that we are not our emotions, we can use our memory to reflect on what just happened. What led us to identify with the emotion? How did it feel when we got sucked into (or identified with) the emotion? What got us out of the emotion and back into awareness? These explorations can help us learn how to stop ourselves from getting sucked into emotions again in the future.

Loud Emotions

Our loudest emotions will usually be those that trigger one of our childhood emotional wounds. If we have done much of our emotional processing work already, we can more easily see (at least after the fact) what emotional issue was being triggered. For example, maybe someone we care about just gave us negative feedback about something we did, and it triggered feelings of inadequacy. Perhaps our parents repeatedly told us that we needed to 'do better', and so feelings of inadequacy are still a sore spot.

At this point, our emotions may still flare up as normal, but once they have settled and we zoom back out, these situations offer us the unique opportunity to see our remaining triggers clearly. For example, in this situation, we might ask ourselves why we got so upset. Do we really care about the negative feedback, or did this situation remind us of something painful from our childhood? Once we find the real wound, we can acknowledge it, experience it fully, and finally resolve it.

Reflecting on Triggers

One of the most effective ways to keep moving deeper into awakening is to look inward anytime you're triggered by another person or a situation. Although it may be tempting to blame, criticize, or get angry with someone when they have done something we don't like, we're better served by looking inward at our

thoughts, emotions, and beliefs related to the situation. These situations are opportunities to better understand the specific beliefs that give rise to our thoughts, emotions, and reactions.

A good habit to get into is to always take a couple of minutes for quiet reflection each time we're triggered by someone or something. If something is *really* triggering, we might reflect on it multiple times over the next few days. This practice can help us see the different thoughts and beliefs that give rise to our negative experiences.

Quiet Emotions

Once we resolve enough of the louder emotions, our witnessing awareness will be able to observe quieter emotions. For example, we can begin to observe the subtle dis-ease that the body carries as a constant protection mechanism. Or, we may notice the uncomfortable sensations that we label as striving, efforting, or clinging.

In a way, we feel better because most of the loud emotions that tossed us around throughout our lives rarely arise anymore. However, because our awareness is getting quite strong by this point, subtle emotions can still feel quite painful. We are acknowledging everything and feeling it fully, which can be a pretty intense experience.

Exercise: Witnessing Subtle Emotions

To strengthen your awareness, let's do a somatic (body-focused) exercise.

- Start by trying to find the most subtle emotion you can locate.
- You might ask yourself, is there any anxiety located in my body? Where is it and what does it feel like?
- Place all of your attention into your body. What emotions are there?
- Spend about 5 minutes just looking for subtle emotions in your body.
- After completing this exercise, take a few minutes to reflect on what you found.

Throughout awakening, our awareness skills will grow in strength. Over time, we become able to acknowledge, experience, and resolve even the most subtle emotions.

Very Quiet Emotions

As we move deeper into awakening, it may become more difficult to label our emotions. This happens because much of what we define as an emotion is actually a mixture of concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and physical sensations. For example, guilt is a combination of a sensation plus a bunch of concepts, beliefs, and thoughts related to what we think we should feel guilty for. As these concepts, beliefs, and thoughts dissolve, we might feel like we don't experience emotions

anymore. We just experience sensations that become increasingly difficult to label as anything specific.

So, as we progress, the way we witness our emotions may change. We become less likely to label our experiences as anger, sadness, or anxiety. Rather, we may have a bit of heat in our belly that is radiating to our neck and our fingers are tingling. If we ask ourselves which emotion this is, we may not really know.

This experience reflects the actual physiology of the body. For example, in research studies, unique emotions can not be detected by looking at either physiology or brain activity (e.g., Posner et al., 2009). It is only our mental labels and self-reported experiences of 'happy' or 'sad' that seem to separate different emotions from each other (e.g., Mauss et al., 2005).

Witnessing Beliefs

Probably the most difficult thing to observe is our beliefs. We generally can't see the beliefs that give rise to our thoughts and emotions until we are deep into development. So, beliefs can be almost invisible before we start looking for them. Once we can see directly that beliefs (and the concepts that they rely on) drive all of our experiences, it becomes much easier to disidentify from them.

Loud Beliefs

The loudest beliefs are the ones that we *can* see. For example, maybe we believe in God, equal rights, or climate change. We could easily tell someone about these beliefs, as they are key parts of our identity. Let's set these beliefs aside for now as they tend to be deeply interwoven into the entire self-concept.

The loud beliefs that we'll focus on here are the ones that are not so easy to see and yet affect large portions of our lives. For example, most people believe that they are not good enough, that they are not worthy, and/or that there is something fundamentally wrong with them. Even though these are extremely common beliefs that have huge effects on our lives, most people don't know that they hold these beliefs.

During awakening, we start to become aware of these beliefs and witness their impacts in real time. For example, maybe we see that our belief that we are not good enough leads us to constantly seek validation. We might notice ourselves choosing actions or taking jobs that other people value. We might see how we continue to pretend to be someone we're not so that other people will like us. Or we may even notice that the words we say to people are designed to convince them that we are worthy. Witnessing how these beliefs play out can be quite painful, but ultimately, it shows us the ways in which we are trapping ourselves with our beliefs.

After we've seen that many of our loud beliefs are just nonsense—we *are* good enough just as we are—we begin to embody this knowing. We not only resolve our belief that we aren't good enough, we actually *feel* good enough and act based on that feeling. Without these loud beliefs clouding our minds, we can begin to witness more subtle or quiet beliefs.

Quiet Beliefs

Quiet beliefs can be quite surprising. We really had no idea that they even existed. For example, we might notice the beliefs we hold that maintain the specific workings of our society. We might begin to have questions such as, "Why do we work 40 hours per week instead of some other number?", "Why do we celebrate certain holidays the way we do?" "Why are we expected to get married and have kids?" or "Why is our money believed to be real and other money (e.g., cryptocurrency) is not considered real?" If we can keep expanding this line of questions, we'll soon discover that our entire world is driven by beliefs.

Exercise: Witnessing Quiet Beliefs

Let's see if we can identify some quiet beliefs.

- To start, list 10 of your behaviors. This could be any behavior (e.g., eating, going to work, speaking to your boss in a specific way, being attracted to a specific type of person, etc...).

- Now, identify the beliefs that give rise to each behavior. For example, maybe you work a job you hate because you believe you would be homeless if you quit.
- Now, for each belief, ask yourself, "Do I know that this belief is true?" After asking this question, don't use your rational mind to find the answers. Instead, just sit with the suggestion that each belief may not be true. Try to experience in your body what it would be like if this belief wasn't true. Then, just witness whatever thoughts or feelings come up for you.
- Lastly, reflect on how this exercise went. Did you discover anything new?

As our awareness continues to get stronger, the way we experience life will slowly shift. Over this period, the beliefs that drive our lives will change drastically.

Transitioning to The Second Stage of Enlightenment

Although there is not a solid line between the stages of enlightenment (and parts of us can be in multiple stages at the same time), each stage has a different feel to it. At the first stage of enlightenment, we have seen through at least one major part of the self. However, we are still attached to our preferred beliefs or concepts, and we avoid our nonpreferred beliefs or concepts. Practically speaking, this allows the mind to continue creating and attaching to new beliefs, concepts, and identities.

When we start moving into the second stage of enlightenment, it becomes much more difficult to attach to preferred concepts, beliefs, and identities and avoid their opposites. Practically speaking, the mind is now deconstructing concepts immediately after they are created. For example, maybe a thought says, "I'm a good person". The very next thought will question the concepts, perhaps saying, "But 'good' is simply a perspective," or, "The 'self' is just an idea", or "That's just a story". The mind is now beginning to deconstruct its own delusions.

Letting Go

Because our attachments and aversions are now being brought into awareness, this is when our attachments and aversions start to fall away. If we got attached to any new ideas, concepts, or identities in the first stage of enlightenment, we will now begin to let them go. It also starts to become clear that mystical experiences are not the goal or endpoint; they are just one more type of experience that we looked to for happiness. arose in our journey. But now it's clear that happiness can not be found in experiences, and so we shift our attention to letting go of everything.

Summary

As our awareness gains strength, it becomes a prominent feature of our experience. Although awareness allows us to step back from our experiences a bit, seeing them clearly can still be painful. By this point, we've acknowledged, experienced, and released

much of our trauma. This allows awareness to begin observing the even more subtle mechanisms that create suffering.

STAGE 2 OF ENLIGHTENMENT

CHAPTER 8

DECONSTRUCTING CONCEPTS

Much of our awakening so far has involved looking at different types of experiences (e.g., beliefs, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, social experiences, and physical experiences). In early awakening, we often have to witness one experience at a time in order to deconstruct it. As we expand further, we eventually become aware that all experiences are dependent on mental concepts. For example, the experience of shame requires that we have a concept of what shame is. If we have a thought about someone disrespecting us, then we must have a concept about what disrespect is. If we have a belief that we are an attractive person, then we must have a concept of what attractive is. Thus, all of our experiences depend on how we define our concepts.

This is an important realization that helps us begin to deconstruct our experiences much more efficiently.

Rather than having to investigate every single experience, we start to see that a single concept can create many different experiences. By seeing through a single concept, we can then shift all the experiences that arise from this concept. For example, if we see through the concept of fear, then none of the things we used to be afraid of can really scare us anymore.

What Is A Concept?

A concept is an idea, mental picture, or something created by the mind—it is a mental creation. Each belief, thought, emotion, and anything else we put a label on is a mental creation or concept. However, most concepts are actually made of a collection of other concepts. For example, the concept of depression is thought to be made up of sadness, specific sleep patterns, eating patterns, and thought patterns. Although concepts are useful for communication, their definitions will always depend on our own unique perspective. For example, I define sadness in a different way than you do. Therefore, concepts can never be real in a solid, permanent, stable sense.

You probably already recognize that certain mental creations (e.g., delusions and hallucinations) are not telling the truth. But have you ever thought about what makes some mental creations *true* and other mental creations *not true*? For example, is imagination true? Not true? Partially true? What about worry? If your worries don't become reality, are they really true? If we think about this deeply and critically, we'll eventually

see that no concepts are true in the way they seem to be.

Emotions Are Concepts

When any experience is labeled as an emotion (such as anger, fear, or sadness) it becomes a concept. When we are young, these concepts feel very solid. For example, when a teenager feels rejected by their peers, it seems permanent and like the emotions will last forever.

When we reach the conventional stages of development, we realize that **emotions do not tell the *full* truth**. For example, our concept of anger may include physical sensations, thoughts, and the urge to scream at someone. At some point, we recognize that even though anger still seems quite real, the part of anger that is telling us to scream at someone might not be completely true. Anger is giving us some bad advice. In other words, we discovered that our emotions are not telling the *full* truth.

At this stage of enlightenment, we now realize that **emotions never tell the truth**. For example, let's imagine we're experiencing anger. To investigate the nature of this emotion, ask yourself the following questions:

- What does it mean to be angry?
- What if someone else defines anger in another way? Who is right?
- Why have we gotten angry at this but not angry at something else?

- If we were seeing this experience from a different perspective, would we be angry?
- Couldn't anything create anger depending on how it's perceived?
- Does the concept of 'anger' mean anything that is permanent?

If we follow this investigation, we'll eventually come to the conclusion that an emotion—like anger—is not a solid, permanent, stable thing. Emotions are entirely subjective. That is, emotions are concepts that are completely dependent on the content of our own minds.

Exercise: Emotions Versus Sensations

When I say that emotions are concepts, I'm talking about *labeled* emotions—things like anger, sadness, anxiety, frustration, hopelessness, guilt, regret, shame, happiness, excitement, etc. These are mental creations. Although sensations can also become concepts when they are labeled, the labels we have for sensations are generally less entrenched in our minds. This often makes it easier to experience sensations without conceptual labels.

To investigate this for yourself, choose an emotion of your choice to focus on. Sadness, anger, and anxiety are the big three and are probably the easiest. Then follow these steps:

- Think about something that brings up the emotion. Thoughts create emotions, so you can think about

something sad, for example, and create sad emotions.

- Once you feel the emotion, turn your attention away from your sad thoughts and sad emotions, and focus instead on the sensations in your body.
- Is your throat tight? Is your chest warm? Is your head spinning? Are you tingling, vibrating, shaking, sweaty? I'm using labels for different sensations to give you examples, but try to just feel your sensations as they are without labeling them as anything.

Our *unlabeled* sensations are embodied knowing, presence, or beingness. *Sensations* can exist even without any mental label or concept to hold them together. Emotions are just sensations that have been labeled in a particular way (e.g., Mauss et al., 2005).

Thoughts Are Concepts

Thoughts are ideas or perspectives that pop up in the mind. When we reach the post-conventional stages of development, we often realize that **thoughts are not telling the *full* truth**. For example, maybe we noticed our inner critic telling us that we're failing in life, but a part of us knows that this thought isn't true. In other words, we discovered that thoughts do not tell the *complete* truth.

At this stage of enlightenment, we now realize that **thoughts never tell the truth**. For example, let's say that a thought tells us that we should feel guilty for not

attending our friend's party. To investigate the nature of this thought, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are thoughts and where do they come from?
- Why did this thought pop up instead of a different one?
- If we were seeing our experience through a different perspective, would we still have this thought?
- Why do we have thoughts that we don't want to have?
- Do thoughts ever tell the truth? How do you know? What, other than a thought, could answer this question?

If we investigate thoroughly, we'll eventually see that thoughts don't ever tell the truth. They are derived from mental recollections of past experiences, projections of the future, and other concepts. Most thoughts don't even make any sense.

Beliefs Are Concepts

Beliefs are ideas or opinions that we accept as true. In the later post-conventional stages of development, we often realize that **beliefs are not telling the *full* truth**. For example, we may notice we have a belief that we are unworthy, but a part of us also believes we are worthy. So, we discovered that our beliefs are not *fully* true.

At this stage of enlightenment, we now realize that **beliefs never tell the truth**. For example, let's say we

now hold the belief that we *are* worthy. To investigate the nature of this belief, ask yourself the following questions:

- What does it mean to be worthy?
- What if someone else defines worthy in another way?
- Can't worthiness be defined in an infinite number of ways?
- What is it that we've done to qualify as worthy? Might somebody else have a different idea of what qualifies as worthy?
- Does the concept of worthiness mean anything that is permanent?

If we investigate thoroughly, we'll eventually see that beliefs are made up in our minds—they aren't solid, permanent, stable things. That is, beliefs are just perspectives, ideas, or concepts that seem very true.

Exercise: The Snake Eating Its Own Tail

If we keep looking at the nature of concepts, we'll eventually see that they are like a snake eating its own tail—there is no beginning and no end. They are just mental creations that make more mental creations, and so on. There is nothing real or permanent that can be found anywhere within them.

To explore this yourself, complete the following steps:

- Begin by writing down a belief that you don't want anymore. For example, choose something like, "I am boring", "I am a failure", or "I am insignificant".
- Next, define the concept. For example, if you are a 'failure', define what you mean by 'failure'.
- Next, define all the new concepts. For example, if you define failure as "someone who doesn't reach their goals", then define 'reach' and define 'goals'. Try to be as thorough as possible.
- Again, define all the new concepts. For example, if you define 'goals' as "the things I want", then define 'things' and 'want'.
- Continue this process of defining each new term until you find that you are defining new terms with the old terms.

This exercise can show you how concepts can not exist without other concepts—there is no beginning and no end. The whole illusion is dependent on itself, like a Ponzi scheme. So if it is clearly seen that one concept is not real, the mind will eventually discover that no concept is real, and the whole thing falls apart.

Exercise: Concepts Are Imagined

To get a taste of the emptiness or unrealness inherent in your concepts, ask yourself the following questions. If your mind tries to jump in with answers, gently ask it to rest so that you can simply feel what conceptual emptiness is like.

- What is between belief and no belief?
- What is between thought and no thought?

- What is between emotion and no emotion?
- What is between self and no self?

Does it feel like there is nothing in between? Does it feel like there is everything in between? Does it feel like there are no words to describe what is in between? Just sit here for a moment with that feeling of conceptual emptiness.

Concepts Are Useful

When the mind creates a concept, it lumps together different aspects of experience and creates separation between the concept and everything else. By using concepts, the mind can understand our experiences and our world. Without concepts, the mind doesn't understand anything.

Concepts are also required for communication. Any time we describe anything, we must use concepts. However, this doesn't mean that concepts actually exist. They are simply a result of the mind breaking the world in bits. Yet, concepts are needed to navigate a social world.

Concepts Create Separation

As we move deeper into awakening, it becomes clear that the boundaries between concepts are artificial—they are created by the mind and are not real in our actual lived experience. For example, we have been talking about beliefs, thoughts, and

emotions. These experiences are *conceptually* separate—they have separate definitions and they refer to different experiences.

When we start to deconstruct concepts, we see that the distinctions we make between things are not actually there. Separation is just an idea. In reality, everything is overlapping and interconnected. However, humans, as a species, have forgotten that we made concepts up and that they don't really exist in a permanent, stable way.

Exercise: Explore Conceptual Boundaries

To explore this further, let's reflect on an experience like 'regret'. If we look at our actual experience, regret may be made up of the following:

- some heavy bodily sensations
- a past action we took
- beliefs and thoughts that the action was 'bad', and
- a concept of 'bad' that is based on our past experiences

Our mind will clump together its own unique mixture of past experiences and actions with current thoughts, beliefs, and concepts to make a concept that we call 'regret'. This concept of regret is seen as *separate* from other experiences happening simultaneously—for example, maybe you're also feeling stressed and hungry. The mind has created artificial boundaries around the concept of 'regret' (which includes a bunch of *other* concepts) and separated it from the concepts

of ‘stressed’ and ‘hungry’ (which *also* include a bunch of other concepts).

Because we are all different, another person's mind will clump together a *different* set of past experiences and actions with current thoughts, beliefs, and concepts to make the concept that *they* call ‘regret’. Their concept of regret is different from your concept of regret. So there are actually as many different types of regret as there are human beings. Every concept is defined slightly differently by every person, so no concept is actually pointing to a real thing.

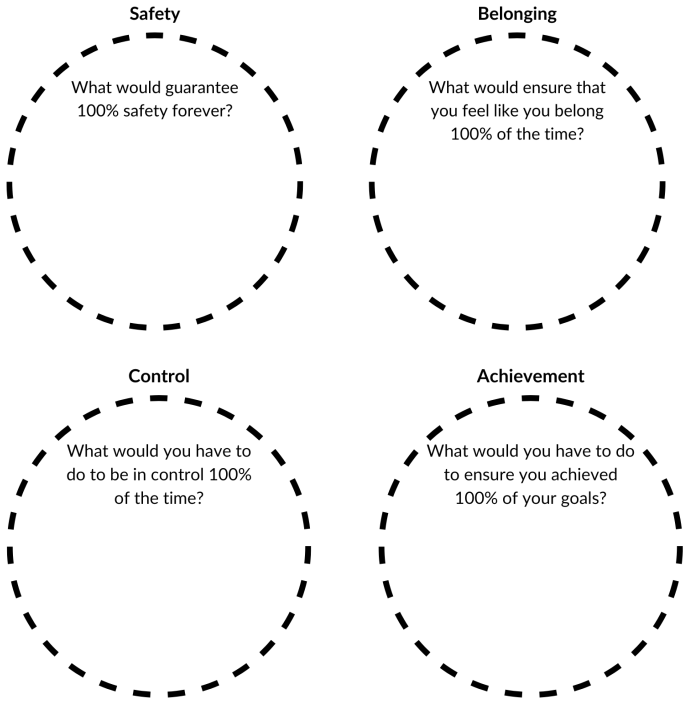
In addition, our concepts are always changing based on our new experiences. When we were very young, regret may have only included things that we got in trouble for. Over time, our concepts grow and become increasingly complex. So now, our concept of regret may include hundreds of different behaviors.

- So, ask yourself now, what is regret? Is it anything? Is it everything? Is it nothing? Take a moment to really investigate this. What do you discover?

With enough investigation, you’ll eventually find that the answer is: ***Yes***. Everything is everything, and everything is nothing. Or, in other words, everything is full and everything is empty.

Exercise: Dissolve Conceptual Boundaries

Take a minute now to see if you can find the boundaries of some key concepts. (Hint: There aren't any boundaries.)



If a concept can never be fully itself, does it even exist? Or is every concept impermanent and always changing?

Concepts Create Destructive Behavior

Some of our most destructive behavior arises from trying to solidify or stabilize our concepts. But, if we realize that there is no pure, permanent, stable form of these concepts, we free ourselves from trying to solidify them.

- Ask yourself, what behaviors do you currently practice in an effort to make safety, belonging, control, and achievement permanent in your life? And can you ever succeed in making them permanent or stable?
- If safety, belonging, control, and achievement can never be permanent, you don't have to waste your time trying to make them permanent. How else might you spend your time?

Early in our journey, seeing through the boundaries of concepts can be challenging—we often have fear, grief, anger, or distress at the realization that our entire world is not what we thought it was. But, after working through this realization, we are much freer to experience reality exactly as it is.

Concepts Are Not Stable

Because concepts are made up by our minds, they are inherently unstable. They have artificial boundaries that can easily be threatened, pushed around, or dissolved by our life experiences. For example, let's take the concept of a 'good person'. Right now, we have an idea of what a 'good person' is. This is based on our unique life experiences. And someone else has a different idea of what a 'good person' is based on their life experiences.

Now, imagine that the best, kindest, most wonderful person you know does something 'bad'—something that doesn't fit your concept of a 'good person'? Their

action, which may have nothing to do with you, feels threatening or unpleasant to you because it shakes your concept of a 'good person'. This really freaks the mind out because it believes that concepts are real, permanent things.

It is because concepts are unstable (and impermanent) that we are perpetually freaking out and feeling threatened by things that have nothing to do with us. Maybe our friend cheats on his wife. It might feel threatening to us if it shakes our concepts of love, marriage, or loyalty. Maybe our niece drops out of school. This might feel threatening to us if it shakes our concept of career or success. Or, maybe our country elects a politician that we find abhorrent. It might feel threatening to us if it shakes our concept of country, ethics, or safety. Everything we experience can feel threatening because concepts aren't solid or permanent. And if we're not aware of this, we can find ourselves getting upset about absolutely everything.

Solidifying Concepts

The mind wants to resolidify a concept anytime it is shaken. For example, imagine that your romantic partner says something to you that you define as disrespectful. This shakes your concept of 'disrespect'. To re-solidify the concept, your mind activates your concept of 'disrespectful', which flows into beliefs ("He shouldn't be treating me this way") to thoughts ("I don't like him disrespecting me like this") to emotions ("I feel angry") to actions (yelling at him). This is how the

simple belief that concepts are permanent leads to the majority of our negative experiences.

Whether we like it or not, life is constantly trying to show us that concepts aren't real, solid, or permanent. As long as we ignore this truth, we continue to suffer. This is what ignorance, in Buddhism, actually means—it's the belief that concepts are actually real things. Once we clearly see that no concept is real, the whole illusion breaks apart.

Exercise: Reification of Experience

Reification is when we treat something abstract (like a concept) as if it is concrete or solid. Let's now investigate how our minds reify (or solidify) concepts and how this creates our subsequent experiences. Although this can happen in an infinite number of ways, let's explore a few examples so that you can see some ways that this might play out.

Situation	**Triggered Concept**	**Belief/ Thought**	**Emotion**	**Action**
Your romantic partner shows up late to a date with you.	Self-worth	"I don't matter to him."	Sadness and dejection	Sulking and then storming off
Bob disagrees about who the president should be.	Badness	"Bob is a horrible person."	Disgust and hate	Cruelty and possibly violence

You win an award.	Goodness	"I am awesome."	Pride, self-esteem and happiness	Arrogance and bragging
You are sent a bill that you weren't expecting.	Insecurity	"I don't have enough money."	Fear	Seeking an additional job
Your boss asks you to revise your work.	Self-doubt	"I'm never going to be good enough."	Despair	Irritation and procrastination

Now, imagine letting go of each of the concepts in the previous examples. What might happen? Might you prevent a cascade of suffering for yourself and others?

Now, explore some of your own experiences. Think of a few situations that you had a reaction to. See if you can identify the concept that felt unstable and how the mind's attempt to reify this concept led to your subsequent experiences.

Situation	**Triggered Concept**	**Belief/ Thought**	**Emotion**	**Action**

The more we do this exercise, the easier it will be to understand the patterns that cause our suffering. And once we see our patterns clearly, they can begin to dissolve.

Looking At Concepts

As we work on deconstructing concepts, we will often find that some concepts are easier to see through than others. For example, maybe it'll be clear to us that the earth and the tree are not really separate—the roots are part of the earth and the soil nutrients are part of the tree. Other concepts, such as self, or body, or mind might be a bit tougher to see through. So, simply keep looking deeply into your concepts, and they will reveal themselves in time.

Summary

When we begin to let go of the idea that concepts are real things, the world becomes a lot less painful. And once we accept that there is no good and bad, we can begin to experience things as they are without trying to force them into the artificial boundaries that concepts create for them.

CHAPTER 9

DISSOLVING THE SELF-CONCEPT

To enter into the first stage of enlightenment, some part of the self-concept has to be seen through. This is our first real glimpse of reality. If we continue to move through the second, third, and fourth stages of enlightenment, we will see through and dissolve the remaining parts of the self-concept, usually one little bit at a time. This process of dissolving the self, while we are still identified with it, can make it feel like *we* are dissolving, losing ourselves, or even dying.

Everything we define ourselves as—our beliefs, thoughts, emotions, etc—progressively evaporates like a puff of smoke into the air. At times, it may feel like we're drowning, grasping for anything 'real' to hold onto. But every time we grasp, we lose our grip. None of our old coping strategies work anymore, and we are left to face abject hopelessness, helplessness, and meaningless without the mental tools we are used to.

Early in (or prior to) awakening, we may have experienced the Dark Night of the *Soul*—a period of purging our heaviest unconscious patterns and trauma. We likely experienced a lot of discontent and meaninglessness as we shed many of our unhealthy behaviors and mental fixations. Now, we experience round two—the Dark Night of The *Self*. This phase involves a complete unravelling of *all* of our remaining patterns. This time, we can't find meaning anywhere—not in our relationships, not in passions, not even in joy itself. We are beginning to see that everything is made up and that nothing exists in the way we thought it did.

When The Self-Concept Begins To Fall Away

Once we've had our initial awakening and seen through some parts of the self-concept, this kicks off a self-perpetuating process by which aspects of the self-concept begin to fall like dominoes. Sometimes, this progresses slowly at first. But, because the existence of a concept depends on the existence of other concepts, seeing through just one part of the self-concept sets these dominoes in motion.

For example, if our awareness notices that we have no control over our thoughts, our mind may begin to question, "Where do thoughts come from?", "If I am not in control of my thoughts, then who am I?", and "What *do* I have control over?" Thoughts like these are

evidence that the self-concept is beginning to self-destruct (in a good way!)

However, because we are all different, each of us is more attached to some parts of the self-concept and less attached to other parts. So, the different aspects of the self-concept will dissolve in a different order and at different speeds for each person. In fact, some of us will even become even more attached to certain parts of our self-concept after awakening (Adyashanti, 2009). Thus, the dissolution of the self-concept progresses in a unique way for each person. In this chapter, we'll discuss the different parts of the self-concept, when each part became prominent during development, and some examples of what it might be like as we begin to see through—or realize the nonexistence of—each part.

The Physical Self

At birth, we had a 1st person perspective. Our self-concept consisted primarily of the physical body—its sensations, perceptions, and bodily needs. Now, as the idea of the physical self begins to dissolve, our sensations and perceptions begin to change in unexpected ways. For example, we might feel like we're merged with everything, like there is no border between us and everything else, or like we're just 'not in there'.

Other sensations, like twitching, shaking, energy rushes, headaches, dizziness, vertigo, or even pain may occur. These sensations suggest that our awareness is

increasing (so we're beginning to notice what was always there) and/or our body is releasing energy or trauma. Allowing your body to move as it wants to and engaging in grounding exercises can help minimize discomfort. Personally, I benefited from standing under a very high-pressure stream of water (like a waterfall) or laying directly on the ground. However, it's important to also get checked out by a doctor to rule out other illnesses, which can and do co-occur with awakening.

Perceptual shifts are also likely to occur. As the self-concept (and the sense of being a separate object) becomes less solid, the external world can seem to blend, become flat, or flicker like a flip book or an old movie, showing one frame after another. Sounds may begin to merge. And even space and time begin to lose their structure.

Needless to say, this can all be very weird and sometimes even frightening. Personally, I found the dissolving of the physical self to be the hardest. One time during early awakening, right in the middle of driving, I lost track of where I was. I seemed to be able to drive just fine, but there just wasn't a 'self' in there—driving was just happening. At the time, it was terrifying. However, in the later stages of enlightenment, experiences like these were often the most exciting.

The Social Self

In our childhood development, when we zoomed out to 2nd person perspective, we added a social self to our self-concept. This is when we began to develop our needs for belonging, validation, and connection. These drives then motivate a ton of our behavior throughout our lives. So, as the social self begins to dissolve, our social behaviors begin to change. For example, unhealthy drives like validation-seeking or people-pleasing stop making sense to us. We may ask ourselves questions like, "If I have no self, then what am I validating?" or "If others have no self, then why do I need to please them?"

We also begin to realize that the majority of our social interactions were driven by either attachment or aversion (we either wanted something or wanted to avoid something). Here are some examples:

- I had lunch with that colleague because I thought it might help my career.
- I answered that email because I didn't want to hurt her feelings.
- I held back my true feelings because I thought he would reject me.
- I attended that party because I was afraid that if I didn't, I would be judged.
- I told that joke because I wanted people to like me.

Each of these actions is done with the goal of protecting or enhancing the social self in some way. When we realize that we don't have a social self, none

of these actions make sense anymore. We lose the motivation to engage in many of our old social behaviors, and as a result, many of our behaviors change.

These changes are often disconcerting to the people who are close to us. To some people, it might seem like we don't care about them anymore. But from our point of view, it doesn't seem like that at all. We now realize that the majority of our past behaviors were self-focused, manipulative, or controlling—we were simply using others to either get what we wanted or avoid what we didn't want. Now, we engage with others only when we genuinely want to and in ways that don't reify (or solidify) our self-concept.

The Agentic Self (or Doer)

As we continued to progress through development, we zoomed out to 3rd person perspective (usually in early adulthood). We then added an agentic self to our self-concept. This is when we began to initiate independent actions and develop a personal sense of responsibility. At that time, we felt that we were the doer. But now, as we begin to see through this aspect of the self-concept, we begin to understand that we are *not* the 'doer'. Actions just happen.

As the agentic self-concept (and the concept of doership) begins to dissolve, our motivation and willpower begin to fade. Without the push of willpower, striving, or efforting, we may find ourselves doing a lot less. Although our lack of motivation can be

worrisome at first, the relief of letting off the gas is quite nice. Actions still happen; they just do so at a more relaxed and natural pace.

As this aspect of self continues to dissolve, we may have interesting experiences related to our dissolving sense of agency. For example, we may at times feel almost like a video game character being played by the hands of life. At other times, we may feel like we're in a flowing river, just going wherever the current takes us. We may even start to feel a sense of surprise when we take action. Life suddenly moves us in an unexpected direction, and because our mind has let go of the idea of doership, we can often be delightfully surprised by our own actions.

What also goes with the agentic self is our sense that we are the decision-maker. The belief that we make our own decisions is a particularly subtle one that takes a while to dissolve. Eventually, we see that even our decisions are outside of our control. At first, this can be distressing. "What if we make the wrong choice?!" our mind may scream. But at some point, we let go of our sense of responsibility for making decisions, and that is a big relief.

The Achiever Self

As we continued to develop, moving deeper into 3rd person perspective, we added an achiever self to our self-concept. This self includes our belief that we can create positive outcomes related to work, money, relationships, emotions, or anything else. While

developing this aspect of the self-concept, we learned how to create many of the outcomes we desired. But now, as we begin to see through this aspect of the self-concept, we begin to understand that there is no self that creates outcomes. Outcomes just happen as a result of innumerable causes.

We may intuitively grasp the concept of dependent origination—the idea that everything can be explained by its causes. For example, a human being is simply the expression of genetics, environment, and an infinite number of interactions between them. Thus, our outcomes can be seen as simply the result of impersonal causes—no self is needed at all.

Once we realize that we are not in control of our outcomes, we stop setting goals and trying to plan everything out. All of that is simply thought, and it just gets in the way of life doing its thing. Life is going to take us where it wants to take us, and the majority of the goals and plans that the mind creates have nothing to do with it.

Of course, we may still occasionally make plans—we still need to agree on a time and place to meet our friend for lunch. But, we understand that the outcomes that the mind predicts may or may not happen. Thus, our attachment to specific outcomes is gone. We stop expecting that life will turn out in a certain way, and this makes it much easier to enjoy whatever outcomes arise.

The Mental Self

If we zoomed out to 4th person perspective in our development, we added a perspective-based self to our self-concept. While developing this aspect of the self-concept, we learned to observe a variety of perspectives. This helped us cultivate empathy and understand why people view life differently than we do. But now, as we begin to see through this aspect of the self-concept, we start to understand that we are *not* the ones creating our thoughts and perspectives. Thoughts and perspectives just appear.

This is sometimes the first domino to fall in our self-concept because it can often be the easiest one to see clearly. After some amount of time observing our thoughts from the zoomed-out perspective of awareness, we can't help but notice that thoughts just keep coming, and we have absolutely no control over any of them. As we watch our thoughts, we see that they lie to us constantly and are wrong about just about everything. As a result, we can see that they are not chosen or under our control.

As we move deeper into awakening, we begin to notice the more subtle thoughts that tell us what reality is. For example, we begin to witness the thoughts that create time and space. But, because we no longer believe that thoughts are true, we start to question what they are telling us. Eventually, we see that what seemed to be a physical world was just thoughts. The more of this we see, the more we realize that we can never actually know anything for sure.

The Contextual Self

If we continued to develop, moving deeper into 4th person perspective, we added more context to our self-concept—for example, we saw that we engage in certain patterns or take on certain roles in different situations. Now, as we begin to see through this aspect of the self-concept, we begin to understand that we are *not* the ones creating our habits and patterns. Patterns and habits arise as a result of innumerable causes that come about as a result of earlier causes, and so on to infinity.

As we disidentify from patterns, we begin to witness our patterns playing out like a movie script. At first, we may find ourselves asking ourselves questions like, "Why am I doing that?!" when we engage in some action that we now see doesn't make any sense. Even though we can see this happening in real time, we are not able to stop ourselves from doing it. But over time, patterns wear themselves out and stop arising.

When it really clicks that we don't have to *do* or *be* anything in particular, spontaneity starts to arise. Instead of following our existing scripts or patterns, we allow life to move us as it wants to. When we allow this flow to move us fully, action happens on its own, not in accordance with any scripts, patterns, or habits, and we simply move in whatever way life moves us.

Emotions & Trauma Buried In The Self

We all have a complex, multifaceted self-concept which includes various mixtures of the different 'selves' we've talked about here. For example, my social self included the belief that others know better than me, fear of conflict, and a habit of people-pleasing. Another person's social self may have a pattern of believing they aren't good enough, fear of being an imposter, and striving for perfection.

Although we weren't aware of it at the time, many aspects of the self were created to hold and repress trauma. For example, a belief that "others know better than me" might be created to repress the feelings of being manipulated or controlled by narcissistic parents. By creating this belief, we don't have to actually experience the pain of being controlled and manipulated. And as long as we maintain the belief, that emotional trauma remains tucked away inside the self-concept.

So, as parts of the self begin to dissolve, there is a risk that old, buried trauma will spring forth. The trauma now has nothing to hold onto, and we will feel the physical sensations of that trauma in our body. If we've done a good amount of emotional processing prior to reaching this point, it's not so bad. We simply experience the discomfort of the self dissolving, and any trauma that comes up is experienced and released in a few days or weeks.

If, however, we still have a lot of unprocessed trauma, this can be an extremely difficult process where we find ourselves being flooded with old emotional pain. The majority of our old coping mechanisms—which were patterns of the self—are no longer operating, and we can sometimes feel very overwhelmed. The more we can stay present with the underlying sensations of these emotions and avoid getting caught up in stories about our past experiences, the quicker we can move through this. The pain just needs to be acknowledged, experienced, and accepted so that it can finally be released.

Although the majority of therapists will not understand exactly what you are going through, they *can* help you work through trauma. So, if you need support, please reach out to a trauma therapist.

Making Progress

Once we get relatively far into this process, and much of the self-concept is already gone, it doesn't feel so much like we are losing the self but rather seeing through something that never existed in the first place. Indeed, we are beginning to wake up *from* the idea of a self (Adyashanti, 2009). And the less 'self' that seems to be there, the easier it is to simply observe whatever is happening.

Summary

As we move through the stages of enlightenment, more and more aspects of the self are seen through. Although this experience can be had in any number of ways, this chapter provided a few examples. We also explored how and why trauma can come up as we move through the awakening process.

CHAPTER 10

UNDOING PATTERNS

As we continue to move through awakening, we often find that our concepts, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors dissolve in layers. We generally peel off the top (or most recent) layers first and then work our way down to the deepest layers.

The Layers That Make Up Patterns

Let's explore an example of how our patterns may dissolve in layers. In the modern world, many people have issues with food. We may overeat, undereat, emotionally eat, eat unhealthfully, etc... These issues generally begin in childhood as a result of watching our parents or other members of society. These early experiences create deep beliefs about when and how we should use food. These beliefs lead us to engage in specific behaviors related to eating.

Because society has a lot of expectations about what we should eat and what our weight we should be, we often begin to form another layer called "the shame layer". Whenever the original pattern gets activated—for example, maybe we feel lonely and then eat a tub of ice cream—it now additionally activates shame. The shame wasn't originally part of the pattern, but it is now. Although we're using the example of eating behavior here, a shame layer can form around any pattern that was not acceptable to those around us (e.g., the way we act, the way we dress, the way we talk, etc...).

Because we still have the original pattern, we can't just stop the behavior or habit. But we also really don't like the shame layer that has become part of the pattern. So, we try to stop the pattern (or at least the shame) by adding even more layers to the pattern. For example, we may diet, eat healthier, exercise more, take diet drugs, etc... These additional layers may work for a while, but maintaining these behaviors takes a ton of effort. The beliefs that create the pattern are still intact, so eventually, we fall back into the original pattern.

Exercise: The Itch & Scratch of Patterns

When a pattern is operating, it feels sort of like a mental *itch* that we are compelled to *scratch*. A clear example is an addiction. The mental itch (or discomfort) builds in our minds until we scratch it—or consume the substance.

The majority of our patterns result from this itch-and-scratch process. Although this can happen in an infinite number of ways, let's explore some examples so that you can see how this may play out.

- I feel emotionally empty (itch), so I eat junk food to stop the feeling (scratch).
- I think self-loathing thoughts (itch), so I harm myself to stop the thoughts (scratch).
- I believe no one likes me (itch), so I stay home and binge on Netflix (scratch).
- I fear being homeless (itch), so I push myself extra hard at work (scratch).
- I feel unloved (itch), so I seek out relationships that validate me (scratch).
- I feel guilty (itch), so I do what everyone else wants me to do (scratch).
- I believe I'm not good enough (itch), so I seek self-improvement endlessly (scratch).
- I feel like I'm incomplete (itch), so I look for a relationship to complete me (scratch).
- I want things to be stable (itch), so I cling to things as they are (scratch).
- I am suffering (itch), so I do whatever I can to not suffer (scratch).
- I feel uncomfortable (itch), so I do anything to distract myself (scratch).

When we just keep scratching these itches, we are completely trapped in our patterns. We simply do what the itch tells us to do. By bringing awareness to each itch and sitting with the sensations without scratching—we actually stop feeling so mentally itchy.

As a result, we discover that we can *choose* our behaviors rather than addictively or compulsively scratching.

Begin this exercise by listing your itches and scratches. Try to notice the specific beliefs, thoughts, or feelings that motivate you to act. Don't worry if you can't list them all—doing this practice even once will make it easier to notice more of your itches in the future.

Once you identify your itches, do your best to sit with each itch without scratching. Be with the emotions and allow them to be experienced just as they are. In time, they will lessen.

The Top Layers Come Off First

As we begin to see our patterns more clearly, they begin to break apart in layers. Usually, the itch and scratch is just the top layer, which falls away first. For example, maybe we first become aware that we have a dysfunctional relationship with food. In my case, I felt shame (itch) and would diet and overexercise to lose weight (scratch).

Had I done the exercises in this book, maybe I would have stopped this pattern before it caused real damage. But, unfortunately, I didn't. Instead, I developed adrenal fatigue and a gut condition called SIBO—I could barely get out of bed or digest any solid food for about 6 months. At this point, we simply need to overcome our denial, stop lying to ourselves, and acknowledge the pattern for what it is. When this

happens, the top layers of dysfunctional patterns start to fall away. For example, I could no longer engage in extreme dieting or over-exercising.

The Middle Layers

Once the top layers fall away, we no longer engage in the behaviors that we used to hide the shame layer. So now we are forced to acknowledge and experience our shame fully. We will eventually see all the ways we tried to suppress or avoid our shame. For example, I saw that to avoid my shame, I refused to eat a piece of my own wedding cake.

Along with the shame often comes grief over the life we missed, over the things we forced ourselves to do, and over the things we didn't let ourselves do. We may also have fear about feeling our shame fully and anger at ourselves or others. So the shame layer includes a lot more emotions that just shame. All we need to do to get through this layer is keep feeling every emotion that comes up, and eventually, we will make it to the other side.

Exercise: The Shame Layer

In this exercise, we're going to try to feel our shame. It's best to set aside 20 minutes to do this exercise in a private place where you know you won't be disturbed.

In a journal, write a list of 5 or 10 things that you feel shame about.

For each item, spend 1 or 2 minutes just feeling the shame. There is no need to judge it, resist it, or try to push it away. Shame is a completely normal experience that just wants to be felt. Once we have felt it fully, it can release. But this can take time, so don't push yourself to do more than you are comfortable with at any given time.

Next, take a moment to write about this experience. Did any of your shame release? Do you have shame that still feels stuck? Where does it feel stuck? Try to feel into the location of your body where it feels stuck.

Although this can be a difficult exercise, try to remember that once shame is felt fully without judgment or avoidance, it won't need as much attention, and so it simply won't arise much anymore.

The Core Belief of A Pattern

After we move through the middle layers of a pattern, loud emotions like shame are no longer clouding the original pattern, and we begin to be able to see it more clearly. For example, I became aware of why I was actually eating. Very early in childhood, I learned that food was something I could rely on. When I felt alone or scared or angry, I had food. And by eating to fullness, I felt complete, secure, and like I mattered. This created the belief that "When I eat, I am safe". This core belief that food makes me safe had been with me for as long as I can remember.

As I was working through the core belief of this pattern, I would notice cravings arise alongside feelings of being unsafe in my body. If I didn't eat to fullness, I actually felt physically unsafe. My mind would make up all kinds of excuses like, "What if I got hungry in the middle of the night?" or "What if my blood sugar dropped and I passed out?" So I would just keep eating until the fear went away.

By this point, the control strategies (like unhealthy dieting and exercising) were no longer operating. The shame was gone. However, because this pattern was woven into the very core of my identity, it was still operating even deep into awakening (and I ended up gaining a lot of weight during this process).

The Core Belief of All Patterns

When you reach the bottom of a few different patterns, you may find the same (or similar) sensations. For example, maybe once you get to the bottom of your food pattern, your relationship pattern, and your career pattern, you notice that they all feel like tension in the gut or chest area.

Although the words you use to describe this 'core sensation' may be different, the experience is usually related to feeling unsafe, incomplete, not enough, unloved, separate, empty, alone, or 'less than'. This is the fundamental sensation of separateness—driven by the fundamental belief that the self is separate from everything else.

Exercise: The Core of Our Patterns

Next time you have a negative emotion, name the emotion. Then keep naming the emotions you're feeling that are related to this main emotion. It might feel like these other emotions are near the main emotion or it may feel like other emotions are behind it. Either way, just keep naming all the emotions you're feeling until you get to what feels like the bottom, root, or core of it.

Depending on your current level of emotional awareness, you may not be able to identify any emotions. Or, you may only be able to identify the top emotion. That's okay! Just keep practicing. The deeper you go, the easier it is to detect the subtler, quieter, deeper emotions. Eventually, you'll find the core—the very subtle sensation of being a separate self.

The Belief in Separateness

For as long as we can remember, we've been taught that we are separate. In childhood, we're given a name that labels us as different from others, we're told what is ours, and we're taught that our body is our boundary. By early childhood, we instinctively react when another child steals *our* toy or when our parents tell us that *we* did something bad. Thus, the concept of separateness is created before we even have memories. This is just how the world is.

By the time we reach adulthood, it seems crazy to

question the concept of self. Our self is the one thing we know better than anything else. And almost everything in our experience—concepts, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, social experiences, and physical experiences—all seem to prove that we are a separate self. That's why the majority of people just go about their daily lives, never realizing that the self is just an idea—it's just a concept that humans made up long ago.

Dissolving The "I"-Thought

One of the main things that convinces us that we have a separate self is the "I"-thought (e.g., Maharshi, 1985). An I-thought is any thought that includes the word "I" or "me" or implies that a separate self exists in some way. The majority of thoughts include an "I"-thought. For example, right now my thought is saying, "**I** hope that **I** can write about this clearly." Even if we're talking about someone else (he, she, or they), thoughts are still coming from the perspective of "I". For example, we might think, "He is a jerk," and although the thought might not say "I", it implies that "he" is separate from "me". But just because a thought says "I", doesn't mean that "I" actually exists.

Exercise: Observing I-Thoughts

We have I-thoughts hundreds (maybe thousands) of times per day. These thoughts reinforce the idea that we are a separate self and that there are real boundaries between ourselves and the world. Take a

moment now to observe your I-thoughts in a short meditation.

1. Start by taking a couple of deep breaths.
2. Place your attention on your thoughts and allow them to just go wherever they want.
3. Observe your thoughts, paying attention to each time a thought says, “I”, “me”, or “mine”.
4. Each time you notice an I-thought, ask yourself: what, where, or who is this “I” that these thoughts refer to? Is there anything permanent that these thoughts point to?
5. Continue observing for a minute or two, seeing if you can note or count the number of times your thoughts refer to an “I”.

Observing the I-thought can be a really helpful way to begin understanding why it’s so easy to believe that we have a separate self.

Summary

Each human lives in what might be described as a maze. Prior to awakening, our lives are made up of these maze-like patterns, which determine the direction we take and how we navigate the world. As these patterns begin to dissolve, we see through the beliefs that formerly trapped us. As a result, we find ourselves becoming more and more free.

CHAPTER 11

WEAKENING ATTACHMENT & AVERSION

To the part of us that has always been free, awakening is a delight. But to the separate self, awakening can feel like torture. The mind instinctually attaches to pleasure and pushes away pain. As these mental processes become more obvious, we watch them in real time. This awareness then leads attachment and aversion to slowly dissolve, forcing us to experience everything we used to be able to avoid. Over months or years, we may have to witness every fear, shame, anger, and guilt, every self-hating thought, every perceived failure, every belief that keeps us trapped in suffering. It is only when we've seen each one clearly, experienced it, and fully accepted it that it stops arising. This can sometimes take a long time.

Aversion or Avoidance

Aversion refers to the concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that dislike aspects of experience. Concepts such as 'should' or 'good' create beliefs about how things 'should' be, which lead to negative thoughts and emotions when things are not how they 'should' be and actions that push these experiences away. Aversion is near-constant, generally making an appearance hundreds of times every day. For example, we might think:

- I don't like this outcome.
- I don't like this experience.
- I don't like this emotion.

With our awareness, we observe this happening in real-time. We finally understand how much suffering we, and others, live with on a daily basis.

Attachment or Desire

Attachment refers to the concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that ***want*** certain aspects of experience. Concepts such as 'deserve' or 'desire' create beliefs about what we want, thoughts and emotions related to striving or seeking, and clingy behaviors. These types of experiences generally occur hundreds of times per day. For example, we might think:

- I want this outcome.
- I want this experience.

- I want this emotion.

Again, our awareness observes this happening in real-time. This observation teaches us that 'wanting' leads to just as much pain as 'not wanting'. In other words, 'push' and 'pull' are equally painful.

The Self-Concept or Identity

As we continue to observe attachment and aversion, we begin to see that it is the 'self' or the 'I' that likes and dislikes things. Our belief that we are a self—and that our beliefs, thoughts, emotions, actions, and sensations are what we are—seems to be driving both attachment and aversion. For example:

- I don't like this outcome because it makes **me** feel insignificant.
- I don't like this social interaction because it makes **me** feel angry.
- I want this experience because it makes **me** feel happy.
- I want this outcome because it makes **me** feel worthy.

Just think of some experiences. Then add the concept of "me" to see how the addition of a self increases suffering. For example:

- "Lost money" versus "**I** lost money."
- "Having surgery" versus "**I'm** having surgery."
- "He's being disrespectful" versus "He's being disrespectful to **me**."

Do you feel how suffering is amplified when there is a ‘me’ attached to an experience?

Exercise: Attachment & Aversion

Once we notice attachment and aversion, they’ll continue pulling our attention into suffering until we disidentify with them. This may involve many attempts, but with our growing awareness, it becomes increasingly clear what attachment and aversion really are.

When you find yourself attaching to something, see if you can identify the beliefs, thoughts, emotions, actions, and sensations of the experience. Then, investigate each component until you see that it is not you. The most difficult part to see is usually the sensations—the actual feeling of pushing and pulling. Once we find the sensations that make it seem like we want something or don't want something, and it becomes clear that they happen on their own (we are not in control of them), then you can disidentify with them and attachment and aversion begin to fall away.

The Illusion of the ‘Doer’ Self

Towards the end of the second stage of enlightenment, I found myself believing another one of the mind’s stories. I was sucked in and attached to the idea that I had free will and that I was ‘the one who makes decisions’. The mind kept weighing the pros and cons

of a decision, and I completely forgot that I am not the one doing this; this is just what the mind does. My mind kept telling me that to get what I wanted, I needed to think, to plan, and to make the right decision. For a week or two, the mind churned and churned while getting nowhere.

I'd like to say that one day it just clicked, and I remembered that "I am not doing this; this is just the mind." But no, my mind fought until it broke. The mind was tormented over making this meaningless decision. That tornado swirled and swirled until it felt like there was a knife stabbing my eye. It created the most painful cluster headache I'd ever had. I'd had cluster headaches quite a few times during awakening, but this pain was so intense that I could do nothing but lay still in the dark.

After the headache subsided, it left me sore and completely exhausted. For days, it was almost impossible to think at all, and when thoughts popped up, they ran out of gas within a second. I could feel the mind trying to start up again, like pulling the cord on a lawnmower. But there just wasn't any gas left. Each pull on the cord sputtered out, dissolving into nothingness. My will was broken and my mind was at peace.

The contrast between the pain and the peace was revelatory. I no longer desired to have control over anything. When I finally recovered from the headache, thoughts arose as normal, but they were a lot less convincing. Every time I felt the pulling sensation of thought—the sensation that makes us think we need to

follow, identify with, or attach to a thought—awareness would focus on the pulling sensation, itself. I could finally see the sensation that underlies attachment. Attachment no longer seemed like it was me, and so it finally started to dissolve.

Breaking The Will

Eventually, awakening will break our will. It shows us, by whatever means necessary, that we have no choice, no control, no free will. It tames us like a wild horse. Many of us thrash and resist until it's just too painful to fight anymore. We are helpless. And we surrender. "Take my will; I don't want it anymore. Just let this torture stop!" we might think.

When we see how much suffering the belief in free will truly causes us, there is no desire to keep it anymore. Even though thoughts make it seem like we are the decision maker, the one directing attention, the one in control, it's all just smoke and mirrors—we are not in control of anything. If we're willing to look and keep looking until we see the truth, we can escape the suffering that the 'free will illusion' creates. And eventually, the will—the belief that there is an individual self that can control anything—is broken.

Exercise: Seeing Through The 'Doer'

Most of us feel like we are the 'doer' of our actions. That there is some sort of decider or decision maker

that is choosing what we do. But this is an illusion created by the mind.

Next time you find yourself pondering choices or trying to make a decision, see if you can identify the beliefs, thoughts, emotions, actions, and sensations of the experience. Then, investigate each component until you see that it is not you. Just like attachment and aversion, the most difficult part to see is usually the sensations—the feeling that makes us think we need to go into the mind to make a choice. Once you identify the sensations that pull you into the mind for a decision, try to just sit with them, bringing as much awareness to them as possible. Eventually, it becomes clear that they happen on their own (with no self in control). Then the belief in an individual doer falls away.

Beyond Free Will

After my free will broke, many things started to change for the better. First, I noticed that my mind gave up the majority of its worries. Worry thoughts just weren't convincing anymore. If my life wanted to implode, there was nothing I could do about it. It was clear that worrying didn't actually do anything (except make life miserable), and worry slowed down a lot.

I also noticed that I no longer cared about deadlines or getting things done, 'on time'. This didn't change my behavior; work kept getting done. I simply stopped *caring* if work got done or not. As a result, I stopped feeling rushed, busy, or time-stressed.

I also found that I was less reactive to certain situations. For example, I had an incident where someone got really mad at me. In the past, my thoughts would have pulled me into a shame spiral, blaming myself for hurting this person's feelings and feeling angry at her for yelling at me. But none of this happened. There was just not enough 'me' to blame, and there was not enough 'her' to be angry at.

However, my thoughts still ran a-mile-a-minute. Thoughts replayed the interaction over and over again trying to recreate an identity as 'the problem solver'. But instead of identifying with the problem and calling it 'mine', the thoughts just zipped along, like a fly buzzing around my head.

Over the next few weeks, I noticed that I still had reactions to situations, but these reactions were small, often delayed, and not very emotional. The concept of control was gone, and the beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that flowed from this concept were rapidly dissolving. All that was left was the raw physical sensations.

For example, I might be having a 'challenging' interaction with someone, and I would notice hot and cold sensations in my body. These sensations often arose after the interaction, or, oddly, right before the interaction (an early sign that the concept of time was beginning to dissolve). It no longer felt like the sensations in my body were caused by the situations,

themselves. They just happened, with no identifiable cause.

The Arising of Deep Grief

Any time we let go of a big pattern or aspect of the self, there is a risk that old, buried trauma will bubble up to the surface. If the dissolving pattern was created to repress trauma, the trauma now has nothing to hold it down, and it starts to come up into awareness for release. This may be especially common when we let go of our individual sense of free will, agency, or control—we've given up the belief that we have any control over anything, including trauma.

So, for me, a deep grief started to arise at this point. Dreams and memories came up about a variety of situations that I wish would have gone differently—times when I wish I would have stood up to a bully, left a toxic relationship, or escaped abuse. These were all situations where I had desperately wanted control but didn't have it.

The desire to avoid the pain of these experiences had created the belief that "If I am in control, I can protect myself from being hurt." All the fear, anger, sadness, shame, and hurt from those experiences had then been shoved into this pattern called 'control'. Anytime these feelings tried to come up into awareness, I shoved them back down with this pattern of control. In other words, anytime I felt harmed by another person, I took control over something. In my case, this resulted in crash dieting, workaholism, and people-pleasing—my

favorite mechanisms of control. This is how beliefs and patterns become tools for avoiding painful feelings.

Now that the concept of control was gone and the pattern was unwinding, all those repressed emotions bubbled up into awareness to be seen and released. For a few weeks, my whole body felt icy-hot, with intense waves of cold and hot moving through different areas, drawing my attention to sensations that I had never allowed myself to fully experience. I could physically feel the sensations of being gaslit, bullied, and abused along with the sensations of avoidance and wanting those experiences to be different. Often, memories would flash across the screen of my mind showing me the precise moment these sensations had been repressed. After a couple of weeks of deep feeling, this entire clump of trauma was gone.

Moving Beyond Attachment & Aversion

At the beginning of the second stage of enlightenment, when I first began to witness attachment and aversion, I had wanted so badly not to want anything, and I hated so much when I hated things. I was completely identified with the pushing and pulling of attachment and aversion. At first, we can only watch helplessly as we desire or pull in situations we want (attachment) and avoid or push away situations we don't want (aversion). At this point, we feel every push, every pull, and the suffering that follows. This is happening so quickly that we still can’t see these mental processes clearly, so we can not yet disidentify from them.

Throughout this stage, most of us observe ourselves attaching and avoiding more times than we can count. And with each observation, there is increased clarity. Over time, we begin to see how the mental processes of attachment and aversion are laid over our external experiences. This shows us that it is not the situations themselves that cause suffering.

Then, it starts to look like the pushing and pulling mechanisms of attachment and aversion, themselves, are causing suffering. The push of aversion might feel like the mind swatting away a fly. The pull of attachment might feel like pulling the cord on a lawnmower.

With continued observation, we can finally see directly that attachment (wanting) and aversion (not wanting) are just neutral sensations that we were identified with—we thought they were us. Attachment and aversion are not even real. They are just the mind's interpretation of what's happening. Once we stop believing the thoughts that tell us that we 'want' or 'do not want' things, then these thoughts no longer cause suffering.

Transitioning to The Third Stage of Enlightenment

Once attachment and aversion are sufficiently disidentified with, we'll begin to move into the third stage of enlightenment. Undesirable situations and uncomfortable feelings can, and usually will, still

arise—we are humans after all. We are just far less likely to attach to or avoid them. We are finally beginning to be okay with life as it really is. As a result, we begin to *experience* life as it really is.

Thus, the shift into the third stage of enlightenment is often pretty clear. When we are no longer attached to the thoughts that tell us that we are separate from our world, our 5 senses begin to show us that nothing is separate. When we are no longer avoiding sensations, we begin to experience the raw sensations that have always been here. Thus, duality begins to resolve itself. Although this might sound scary to someone who still has a lot of attachment and aversion—and it can be scary if we get glimpses of nonduality earlier on in awakening—the direct experience of nonduality is often quite enjoyable once we reach this stage.

Summary

Letting go of attachment and aversion is an important milestone in our awakening journey. In one way, this may be one of the hardest parts of the journey because we are becoming aware of the causes of our suffering. In another way, we are finally beginning to *see through* the apparent causes of our suffering. So, if we can make it to the end of this stage, certain aspects of suffering are gone.

STAGE 3 OF ENLIGHTENMENT

CHAPTER 12

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

By this point, we know, at least intellectually, that we are not truly separate. But, in our daily lives, every object still looks like it is separate from every other object (Ingram, 2018). Our physical body still feels separate from everything else, and our 5 senses seem to provide evidence of this separateness.

However, this all begins to change when we move into the third stage of enlightenment. The dissolution of the self-concept now begins to directly affect our physical experiences, namely our 5 senses and bodily sensations. A little bit at a time, we actually start to perceive nonduality or nonseparateness (e.g., Ingram, 2018).

Shifting Experiences of Oneness

It's important to note that we can have significant realizations about emptiness, fullness, oneness, and nonduality at any point in the journey (Wilber, 2024). Indeed, many people have nondual experiences in earlier stages of development, even before awakening (for example, in meditation or while on psychedelics).

In all the *developmental* stages, nonduality might be described as a sense of oneness or nonseparateness. However, this definition can be misleading because, at earlier stages of development, we are not yet aware of *all* aspects of ourselves and our reality. So we merge with what we are aware of, and we think that this is nonduality.

For example, if we awaken from 1st or 2nd person perspective, we may merge with physical objects. If we awaken from 3rd or 4th person perspective, we may merge with physical *and* mental objects (O'Fallon, 2010-b). If we awaken from a 5th person perspective, it doesn't feel like two things merging into one. It is just realized that the concept of 'separate' is an idea; it never really existed in the first place. This experience of nonduality is not mystical at all; it is actually very ordinary.

Two Versions of Nonduality

At the beginning of my own awakening, when the majority of my self was in a 4th person perspective, I had a lot of nondual *experiences*. It was like being in a video game. Everything was connected, but it seemed

like I was still choosing my actions and having interactions with other apparent characters.

As I moved into permanent nonduality, it was more like being in a movie than a video game. Everything looked like it was all one, like pixels making up a 3-dimensional hologram. But there was no agent, player, or self in charge of 'my' actions. Everything was just happening on its own.

When nonduality is clear and permanent, there really isn't any merging, unity, or connection—all of these words imply that two things become one. It is just seen that there is literally nothing that was ever separate from anything else. Everything is nothing (meaning it has no individual essence, identity, or solidity) and everything is everything (meaning there is no separation anywhere).

Boundaries Dissolve

In the third stage of enlightenment, it's not that we (the subject) feel merged with something else (an object). Rather, the whole subject/object duality is seen to be an illusion. In the past, it seemed like there were boundaries between things, but now, we can't find boundaries anywhere. It turns out that boundaries were just mental concepts.

Exercise: Dissolving Self Boundaries

Take a minute now to see if you can find the boundaries of the self. Keep in mind that the self includes the physical body, social experiences, behaviors, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and concepts.

This exploration can be difficult at first. So let's explore each part of the self-concept, one at a time. Keep in mind that there are no right answers. The goal here is to simply look deeply.

Explore your physical self:

- In what ways is your **physical self** boundaryless? For example, do food, air, toxins, water, and other things cross the boundary of your body?
- At what point are these things 'you' and at what point are they 'not you'? Is there actually a boundary?

Explore your social self:

- In what ways is your **social self** boundaryless? For example, do your interactions only affect you or do they affect others?
- Have you ever caught someone else's emotions?
- At what point are these things 'you' and at what point are they 'not you'? Is there actually a boundary?

Explore your agentic self (the doer):

- In what ways is your **agentic self** boundaryless? For example, did your skills or actions just arise, or did you learn your skills from other people or

objects?

- Do your actions affect others?
- At what point are your actions 'you' and at what point are they 'not you'? Is there actually a boundary?

Explore your achiever self:

- In what ways is your **achiever self** boundaryless? For example, did your degrees, awards, outcomes, achievements, positive emotions, and other achievements come from you, or did they arise in the context of a society with others?
- Is 'achievement' even a thing if there is no other person to compare it to?
- At what point are your achievements 'you' and at what point are they 'not you'? Is there actually a boundary?

Explore your mental self:

- In what ways is your **mental self** boundaryless? For example, did your opinions, perspectives, and thoughts come from you or did you learn them from parents, society, or other people?
- Has anyone ever taken or built upon your idea?
- At what point are your thoughts 'you' and at what point are they 'not you'? Is there actually a boundary?

Explore your contextual self:

- In what ways is your **contextual self** boundaryless? For example, did your beliefs, patterns, roles, and stories just arise? Or were they created through many interactions with others?

- Have your patterns ever affected anyone else?
- At what point are your patterns 'you' and at what point are they 'not you'? Is there actually a boundary?

Is there any aspect of the self that has a solid, permanent boundary?

Exercise: Boundaries Visualization

Another way to begin seeing through the imaginary boundary of a self is through visualization exercises.

- Take about 5 or 10 minutes now to explore the feeling of your body's apparent boundary.
- After closing your eyes, see if you feel any sense of a boundary between your body and the external world.
- Do the sensations seem to end at a specific border, or are they more fuzzy or expansive beyond your body?
- When we close our eyes and focus on our body, we will generally see a mental picture of our body's boundary. Now, with your eyes closed, see if you can find this mental picture of your body's boundary.
- This mental picture is a thought. Can you stop that thought for a moment? (If you can't, keep practicing).
- If you *can* stop the thought of a physical boundary, feel what it's like to simply be present in your body without any thought or mental picture of your body's boundary. What does it feel like?

Once you have explored your internal experience for a few minutes, reflect on what you discovered.

Pain Reflection

Another interesting way to practice this skill is when you accidentally hurt yourself. Next time you stub your toe, bang your arm, or get a papercut, close your eyes and see if you can locate the boundary of the pain. You'll likely discover that physical pain doesn't have a boundary. It might feel like the pain spreads throughout your body beyond the location of the wound. You might even feel the pain both inside and outside of your body.

A New View of Mystical Experiences

Early in our awakening, we may have had mystical experiences where it felt like we were interacting with a separate being or entity of some sort. We may have merged or communicated with this separate entity. In other words, there were still boundaries that seemed to separate us from them. If we are still having mystical experiences when boundaries start to dissolve, these experiences will now seem a bit different.

If there is no self, then there is no other. If there is no boundary, then there is no merging. So, concepts like 'psychic', 'clairvoyant', or 'channeling' don't really make sense anymore. Everything is like one big soup. Nothing is separate from us. Everything is part of us. So it no longer feels like information is coming from something separate. Therefore, all of the experiences

we previously labeled as 'mystical' are seen to simply be a natural expression of an interpenetrating whole. Everything seems possible, yet nothing is owned.

Later, as we move even further into boundarylessness and nonduality, the concept of 'mystical experience', itself, starts to lose meaning. Thoughts and beliefs told us that something we experienced was mystical, but without these thoughts and beliefs operating, all that's left is 'what is'. Not good, not bad, not meaningful, not unmeaningful. In a way, everything seems completely ordinary. In another way, everything seems amazingly incredible.

The Sound Current

Some of us may begin to experience nonduality through sound. According to physics, everything in the world is made of energy that is constantly vibrating. So, there are a variety of subtle hums, buzzes, and squeals going on all the time. Crystals have a sound (Vig, 1992). The earth has a sound (Nevoit et al., 2025). Even humans are made up of different sound frequencies (Herrmann, 2001). The brain learns to filter these sounds out because they aren't relevant to our modern lives. But, if you start listening more intently, you may start to hear these sounds. This sound current—which is like the soup of all sounds combined—often sounds like 'Om' or 'Aum'.

Although I rarely meditate, I really enjoy sitting outdoors, listening to sounds—listening to the wind, birds chirping, rain drops, and the sounds of a train in

the distance. So, I started hearing the sound current almost immediately after my initial awakening. As I approached nonduality, the sound current began to blend with other sounds. Then, once all sounds were one, my other senses slowly began to merge with each other. For example, sensation and sound started to feel the same. Everything was slowly revealing its true nature.

Summary

When we lose our concept of, and belief in, boundaries, our experiences stop reflecting these illusory beliefs. Suddenly, things start to blend together in ways that previously seemed impossible. For example, sounds now feel like they are both inside and outside. Physical sensations are both inside and outside. And even visual experiences can feel like they're both inside and outside. Eventually, it becomes clear that the mind’s concepts made it seem like there were boundaries everywhere, but reality isn’t actually like that.

CHAPTER 13

THE END OF TIME & SPACE

Although we may now understand that there is no self and there are no boundaries, we still feel like we are physically separate from others (and from everything) in space. It seems like we are a body/mind at the center of a particular location, perceiving everything around us with our 5 senses. But as we continue to move into nonduality, our experience of the "external" world starts to shift. Perhaps the things we see don't look quite as solid as they did before. Or, perhaps the imagined mental boundary of our physical body starts to pop in and out of existence.

The Thoughts That Create Space

As awareness gains strength, we'll be able to observe that our concepts and beliefs about space create thoughts that tell us where something is located in space. For example, when we hear a dog barking in the

distance, a thought immediately arises telling us that the sound is coming from our left side and it is pretty far away. Or, when someone touches our shoulder, a thought pops up telling us that the sensation is coming from our shoulder area. Or, when we reach out to open a door, thoughts tell us how far to extend our arm to reach the doorknob.

As we become aware of these very subtle thoughts and how they are creating our reality, we buy into these thoughts less and less. As a result, they stop creating the world that we're used to. We actually stop experiencing space in the same way.

For instance, if I'm walking around the park and hear a bike come up behind me, I sometimes can't tell how far away the bike is. The thoughts that used to tell me this information no longer arise. Or, when my husband pats me on the back, I feel the sensation but I can't locate where it's coming from. Or, when I reach out to open a door, I sometimes fail to estimate the distance correctly and find myself grabbing at the air. As the experience of space starts dissolving, it can be quite surprising. Everything can look normal one minute, and then the next minute, the mental concepts that seem to make up space just aren't there. As a result, things can look blurry, disjointed, or wobbly (e.g., Sayadaw, 2016).

Although this is generally quite enjoyable and fun, it can occasionally be a bit disconcerting, especially while driving. It may occasionally become difficult to tell how far away or close other cars are. Sometimes

they can appear like they are popping out at us—they are extremely close. Other times, they might blend into a flat background. So, from this point on, we often need to be more attentive when navigating the spatial world.

Exercise: Identifying The Thoughts That Create Space

To bring awareness to the thoughts that create space, take a moment now to observe an object that is in front of you. Now ask yourself the following questions.

- What is the distance between you and the object?
- The answer you just gave is a thought. Is there any way to determine the distance between you and an object without a thought?
- What is distance (or space) without thought?
- How do you know *where* the object is located in space?
- The answer you just gave is a thought. Is there any way to determine where anything is without a thought?

Hopefully, this exercise helped you begin exploring the subtle thoughts that create the experience of being in space.

Vertigo & Dizziness

It is not uncommon to experience dizziness or vertigo as the concept of space dissolves. As someone who

gets nauseous on airplanes, swings, or even while floating in the pool, I found the initial changes in my visual field to be quite disruptive. I had several bouts of vertigo, dizziness, and nausea as the visual field stopped looking solid and stable. Sometimes, it would look like things were swaying side to side or spinning. Other times, everything would become wavy like a mirage. Luckily, these nausea-producing experiences only happened occasionally over the course of a few months.

After this shift stabilizes, the visual field looks different permanently. Sometimes it can feel like we're wearing 3D glasses in a movie theater. Other times, the world might seem to fall backward into a flat 2D image that looks like a painting. But most of the time, at least for me, everything just looks like a hologram. Every "object" appears like a shimmering image reflecting on the surface of one completely interconnected screen.

The Sensations of Space

Once we become aware of the thoughts that correspond to the sense of space, we can begin to observe the extremely subtle sensations that give rise to these extremely subtle thoughts. For example, when something is near, versus far, it feels different. When thoughts label these sensations as space, distance, and location, these sensations appear to actually be space, distance, and location. But that's an illusion.

Exercise: Identifying The Sensations That Create Space

As the thoughts that create duality fade out of awareness, we will start to notice the very subtle sensations that seem to create space. Let's do a little exercise to hone this skill.

1. Before beginning, select an object that you can pick up and hold up in front of your face for an extended period of time—perhaps a pen, cup, or small book.
2. Hold this object up in front of your face at arm's length, as far away from your face as you can.
3. Now, focus all of your attention on the sensations in your face. What do you feel?
4. Keep your attention fully on the sensations in your face as you look at the object, and slowly move the cup towards your face. Come as close as you can without touching the object to your face. What do you feel?
5. Repeat this a few times, keeping your attention on the sensations in your face. Do you notice how the sensations change as you move the object closer and farther away from your face?
6. Now, close your eyes and repeat the exercise again. Are the sensations different when you can see the distance between you and the object versus when you can't?
7. Keeping your eyes closed, repeat the exercise one more time. This time, try not to create a mental image of the object in your mind as you are moving

it towards your face. If you can remove all mental images from your mind, that's great. If not, just shift your focus by imagining a sunny beach or something else to keep the mental images of the object from entering your mind.

8. Do the sensations in your face feel different when there is neither a visual or mental image of the object?

If you didn't feel anything, that's completely fine. This exercise directed your focus to *extremely* subtle sensations that are difficult to detect when the mind is still noisy.

Either way, take a moment to reflect on your experiences. What do you think about the suggestion that space is created from a mixture of sensations and thoughts?

The Self In Time

At this point, we may also begin to notice weird manifestations of time. For example, physics shows us that cause and effect aren't actually real (Carroll, 2016). What the mind has labeled 'cause and effect' is actually more like a pattern propelling forward and backwards at the same time. The mind then chooses, somewhat randomly, what it thinks is the 'cause' and what it thinks is the 'effect'.

When the thoughts that label causes and effects stop arising, it can get real trippy. For example, we may begin to hear sounds earlier in time than the thing that

supposedly caused them. The sounds may also continue later in time even though their apparent cause is no longer present. Just imagine hearing an echo of the music of a radio before you turn it on and an echo of the radio after you turn it off. It's pretty crazy.

You may also notice other causes and effects that no longer follow the 'correct' timeline. For example, you might feel the emotions and sensations of anger or sadness before the experience that supposedly evokes them. Or, you may have thoughts about something happening before it happens. In other words, effects may arise before their causes. Experiences like these are truly mind-bending and often lead our concept of time, which suggests that everything is a sequence of causes and effects, to completely fall apart.

Memories

At this point, some people can start to have more difficulty locating memories (or thoughts about the past). The mind used to know where to look for memories. (The mind would look to the past, duh!). But now, it's like the mental filing cabinet that organized the past has been tossed around the room, and the mind doesn't know where to locate memories. We're not sure what happened in the past, when it happened, or if it even happened at all. Practically speaking, it can be difficult, for a while, to get to appointments on time, remember what we were going to say in that work meeting, or even bring to mind what was said only a moment earlier.

Time-Stress

On a more positive note, we also have more difficulty locating thoughts about the future. Without the constant arising of future-oriented thoughts, we experience a notable reduction in anxiety, worry, and time-stress. If we previously had a mental filing cabinet that organized the future (with plans, goals, or timelines), this paperwork has also been tossed around the room. We have no idea where we're going, but we're not thinking much about where we're going anyway, so we can actually enjoy the present moment much more easily.

Exercise: Identifying The Thoughts That Create Time

To bring awareness to the thoughts that create time, take a moment now to ask yourself the following questions.

- What is the future? What is the past?
- The answer you just gave is a thought. Is there any way to determine anything about time without a thought?
- How do you know *when* something occurs in time?
- The answer you just gave is a thought. Is there any way to determine when anything occurs without a thought?
- If there was no memory, then what would time be?
- Is there any way to verify cause and effect without using thought or memory?

- In your experience, is there any evidence that time exists (outside of thought)?

Hopefully, this exercise points you in the right direction and helps you begin deconstructing the concept of time.

The Sensations of Time

Once we become aware of the thoughts that correspond to the sense of time, we can begin to observe that the experience of time also involves a set of extremely subtle sensations that have been labeled by extremely subtle thoughts. For example, when a thought refers to something in the future, like a goal, worry, or hope, we might feel a sort of pulling forward. To me, the sensation feels sort of like funneling forward from my chest. I also notice that there is an uncomfortable resistance to the present moment that seems to precede this funneling sensation.

Exercise: Identifying The Sensations That Create Time

As our experience becomes increasingly nondual, we will be able to notice the very subtle sensations that seem to create time. Let's do a little exercise to hone this skill.

1. Before beginning, select something that you often like to think about in the future. For example, maybe you worry about money, security, or

success. Or, perhaps your future-oriented thoughts focus more on hopes, dreams, and ambitions.
2. Take a few moments to think about the future in your preferred way.
3. Now, shift your focus from your thoughts into your body. What do you feel?
4. Switch your attention back and forth between 1.) the future-oriented thoughts, and 2.) the sensations in your body.
5. Can you detect the sensations associated with these future-oriented thoughts? Are there specific sensations that feel like time?

If you didn't feel anything, that's completely fine. This exercise directed your focus to *extremely* subtle sensations. Our minds have to be very quiet in order to notice them.

Either way, take a moment to reflect on your experiences. What do you think about the suggestion that time is created from a mixture of sensations and thoughts?

Flashing or Strobing

Visually, the dissolution of the concept of time can result in visual experiences that seem not to flow as smoothly as they once did. For example, normally when the wind blows, a thought pops up telling us that the leaves on the trees are moving back and forth over time. As thoughts of time fade, the wind blowing through the trees might start to look more like a series

of flashing or strobing images rather than one smooth movie. Similar to the dissolution of space, this may also cause dizziness, vertigo, or disorientation.

Waking Up From The Dream

While eating lunch one day, it suddenly became clear that everything is literally a dream. For a moment, I felt like I was floating in space with no way to orient at all. Then waves of bliss rolled in as freedom expanded further.

In the dreams we have while sleeping, there is always a self with a perspective and an experience. When we wake up from sleep, we realize that we dreamed that self, the world around that self, and the experiences that this self seemed to have—all of that was made of some sort of wispy mind-material. The 'real' world is made of the same wispy mind-material that thoughts, dreams, and imagination are made out of. This is what people mean when they say everything is made of consciousness.

The third stage of enlightenment is so much like waking up from a dream. We can directly see that the self, the world, and all experiences are like a dream in a 'Universal Mind' with no time and no space. This dream is not in a small human mind—like our dreams at night—it is in an unlimited Mind that includes absolutely everything. But now we can literally see that all of our experiences—both mental and physical—are made of this dream-like, mental, nondual "stuff".

There are no solid, real 'somethings'. Everything is just this interpenetrating dream, wave, or hologram. And like a dream, we have no control over anything. The seeing, itself, is what sees. The hearing, itself, is what hears. Attention, itself, is what attends. Life is just "lifing"—doing its thing. Everything is playing out on its own, like a dream.

Now when we look down at our body, it looks just as dreamy and non-solid as everything else. Once we see this clearly, boundaries no longer make any sense at all. No things—not objects, ideas, or individual selves—are separate from anything else. Everything is Mind or Dream, and therefore, it's all one.

The clearer it becomes that we are not, and could never be, separate from anything, the more intimate everything feels. Everything feels very close and intense. For example, we might look at a tree branch and almost feel knocked off our feet. Or, we might feel sensations blow through us, almost like a gust of wind. We are everything and everything is us.

Living in a Dream

At this point, everything seems miraculous, and we may delight in simply observing the shimmery, holographic nature of everything we see. It is fascinating! How is it possible that we never noticed how reality actually looks? It's funny to think about how solid and permanent we used to believe everything was. Without the mind clouding our senses with its concepts and labels, everything just seems like

undulating waves of colors, shapes, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations. All of it, from the tiniest blade of grass to the most beautiful landscape, is awe inspiring.

Summary

This stage can provide a bit of reward for what may have felt like a long, harrowing journey through the earlier stages of enlightenment. We now explore all of our old experiences again from the perspective of being completely immersed in them. In a funny way, we realize that the separate self was partially right all along. We *are* experience. The separate self just got a bit confused and thought that it could pick and choose which experiences to be. Now, we are all of it.

CHAPTER 14

THE SENSATIONS OF BEING

By 15 months of age, we have already developed a sense of self, to some extent (Butterworth, 1992). That mental sense of self provides a barrier between us and everything else—a protective boundary of sorts that keeps us from experiencing our sensations fully. As we grow up, we continue to add to this self, locking away numerous other sensations under different aspects of identity.

For example, maybe our identity as "the nice one" prevents us from feeling the strong sensations of rage. Or an identity as "the strong one" prevents us from feeling the deep sensations of grief. Or an identity as "the funny one" prevents us from feeling the grating sensations of social rejection. Each identity houses sensations that we didn't want to feel. And now, as each identity disappears, those sensations are felt fully for the first time.

Without the mental veils that we are used to, the sensations of experience can often feel very intense. We've never fully felt the depth of grief, the expansiveness of pure joy, or the burning of hatred. So we may now spontaneously feel delightful goosebumps or heavy waves of fear for no apparent reason. There is still a subtle sense of awareness, perception, or presence—a feeling that we are experiencing our world, yet our sense of control over these experiences is practically non-existent.

Core Sensations

There are many sensations that we have always had access to, even when our minds were very busy with concepts and labels. For example, we know the sensation of being hungry. We know the sensation of needing to pee. We know the sensation of being tired. And we know the sensation of air moving in and out of our lungs. These sensations were always here, and we touched them every day. The difference now is that we begin to notice the sensations that underlie *all* of our experiences.

The Sensations of Emotions

If you look a bit deeper, it's not too difficult to feel the underlying sensations of emotions. For example, anger is often felt as heat in the chest or head, sadness is often felt as pain in the heart or throat, and bliss is often felt as tingles all over the body (e.g., Nummenmaa

et al., 2014). Because of the intensity of these sensations, it can be fairly easy to find them. If you're willing to simply stay with these sensations and feel them fully, you can begin to transcend them. The reason this is so difficult prior to awakening is that the mind is still labeling many of these sensations as bad, scary, or painful.

Sensations and The Senses

If we observe even more closely, we will notice that the 5 senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—also have corresponding sensations. Perhaps the most obvious sensation arises in response to eating food. We can feel the sensations of salt, sweet, bitter, and spicy, even before we have labeled the food as yummy or gross. You might have also noticed that certain bad smells correspond to a sensation of nausea or stomach churning. We also tend to experience enjoyable sensations when we are physically touched (e.g., Kreuder et al., 2017).

The Sensations of Hearing

The sensations that correspond to sounds are also fairly easy to detect because sounds are made of noticeable vibrations. You can test this out for yourself. For example, if you're at a concert, simply pay attention to the vibrations of the sounds in your body. The base might feel like it's rumbling throughout your limbs, or the drums may feel like a pounding in your chest.

Once you've identified the sensations of loud sounds, you can keep honing this skill by focusing your attention on more and more subtle sound sensations. For example, you can pay attention to your sensations as you're listening to loud music. Then, slowly turn the volume down until you can no longer detect a sensation. Keep practicing this until you can feel the sensations of very quiet sounds.

The Sensations of Seeing

Sight also has corresponding sensations. Neuroscientists inadvertently study this all the time—they study how our physical body (namely, the brain) responds to different visual experiences (e.g., Chang et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2014). Indeed, modern science has already shown that our brains and physiology change in response to different visual experiences. If we pay enough attention to the body, we can actually *feel* the different sensations we have in response to different visual experiences.

You can test this out for yourself by paying attention to the sensations that arise in your body as you look at images of very intense scenes—things like spiders, injuries, or scary dogs (e.g., Lang et al., 1997). Then, switch to looking at images of cute puppies and kitties. Note how the sensations in your body change.

Once you have honed this skill by looking at intense images, you can then try to detect the very subtle sensations that arise when looking at less emotional or seemingly boring images and scenes. For example, with practice, you'll be able to feel how sensations change

in response to looking at a person, versus looking at a tree, versus looking at a traffic jam.

The Sensations of Thoughts

With continued observation, we can notice the subtle sensations that arise with different thought patterns. For example, you may have already noticed that anxiety (which arises from certain types of thoughts), often results in a pounding heart, feeling flushed, or even the sensation of tingles in the hands or head.

With practice, we can also detect the more subtle sensations of other mental processes. For example, we can feel the sensations of attachment and aversion. Attachment may feel like being sucked or pulled up into the head (for some reason, my attachment also pulls to the left). And aversion may feel like a downward pushing or squashing sensation in the chest or solar plexus area.

Similarly, getting trapped in a thought stream might feel hot in the chest. In fact, I call the sensation of the thought stream the "hot thought" sensation, because the faster the thoughts move, the hotter the sensation seems to get. Additionally, sad thoughts may feel hollow, guilt thoughts may feel like pushing away, and panic thoughts may feel like a flash or poke in the chest. These are just some examples. Your sensations may feel totally different than I describe. The only way to know for sure is to bring awareness to them and feel them for yourself.

The Sensations of Actions

Even the experiences that make up the sense of free will—which includes motivation, decision-making, and action-taking—have corresponding sensations that can be felt in the body (e.g., Smith, 2008). This is often much more difficult to observe, but it is detectable with practice. Anytime you feel like taking an action, pause, and see if you can identify the sensation.

For example, if you are on a walk and need to turn left or right, try to ignore your thoughts for a minute, and see if you can feel which direction you're being pulled in. It can be pretty shocking when you find yourself moving in one direction or another without any thoughts claiming to have made that decision. For our entire lives, our thoughts and an imaginary self took credit for our actions, but it turns out that the body was driving itself all along.

To continue opening yourself to sensations, you might also pause when you're rushing, exerting effort, or striving. See if you can locate the corresponding sensations. Then, question why you believe you need to act a certain way. The paradoxical thing is that once you clearly see the sensations that underlie free will, you may 'choose' to act differently. Although the choice actually makes itself, it is incredibly freeing to move in this new way. This is freedom beyond free will.

Summary

Although opening to sensations can be intense, it feels so much more real and authentic than anything we've ever known. As we continue to move towards our experiences, feeling everything more and more fully, we clear out more emotional baggage and trauma. And as long as we allow this process to happen, we'll keep moving forward.

CHAPTER 15

THE SUBTLE SELF

Early in awakening, we realized that life is not what we thought it was, and we are not the small separate self that we thought we were. As we zoomed out to view life from a wider perspective, it became clear that we are not *any* of the experiences that we observe. Many of us then began to identify with the awareness that is observing everything. Thus, we may have created a new identity as the 'awake self', 'aware self', 'higher self', or 'big self'.

This 'subtle self' can be a very useful tool as we move through awakening. It not only helps us see our beliefs, thoughts, and emotions more clearly, it also helps us feel like we have something to hold onto as we undergo the difficult task of disidentifying from the other parts of our self-concept. However, the mind often capitalizes on this opportunity, creating an even more inflated, egoic 'big self' (Adyashanti, 2009). It

feels incredibly good for the self to claim, "I am everything!" So, it is not uncommon to get attached to this new, but still illusory, identity.

Once nonduality starts to clarify itself, even the 'awake self', 'aware self', or 'big self'—whatever identity we're still attached to—stops making sense (e.g., Schanilec, n.d.). We can't possibly be an awareness that observes everything else, because nothing is separate (e.g., Goode, 2016). And if everything is nondual, then how can anything be *more* real than anything else? As long as we maintain an open mind and keep thinking critically, we'll see the illusions that still remain.

Exercise: How Space Creates Awareness

By this point, we have seen through the concepts of space and time. Although we have used our awareness to observe everything up to this point, without space and time, awareness no longer makes sense, and it begins to deconstruct itself.

To explore how space makes awareness seem real, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is awareness?
- The answer you just gave is a thought. Is there any way to experience awareness without a thought?
- If there is no such thing as space, then how can awareness observe anything?
- If there are no objects, then what is awareness observing?

- If reality is nondual (not two), then how can awareness (the subject) observe things (objects)?
- Is there any way for awareness to exist without the concept of space?

With careful reflection, we can clearly see that awareness is a concept that is reliant on the concept of space. Without space, there is no awareness.

Looking Back At Awareness

Even if we have gained an intellectual understanding that awareness is just a concept, it can still feel like there is something observing, witnessing, or being aware of everything. That something can feel like a self. To gain experiential knowing that awareness is a concept, try to shift the focus of awareness back on itself. Anytime you notice awareness observing something, ask yourself the following questions. Who is the one that is aware? Can awareness actually be found in your experience? If everything is one, how can awareness be different or separate from experience, itself?

Exercise: How Time Creates Awareness

Take a moment now to explore how time makes awareness seem real. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Look at one object. Now look at another object. How do you know that your awareness has moved

from one object to another? Is there a memory of the first object that is still in mind while viewing the second object?

- If there was no memory, would it be possible to be aware of awareness?
- Is awareness just a series of memories that play the earlier moments back to us like a video recording?
- If a memory is something that is being displayed to us *now*, then is there any evidence at all that awareness is anything more than a mental concept?
- Is there any way for awareness to exist without the concept of time?

With careful observation, we can clearly see that awareness is a concept that is reliant on the concept of time (e.g., Sayadaw, 2016). Without time, there is no awareness.

Awareness Creates Duality

According to the famous double slit test, atoms act like solid particles when they're being observed. Atoms act like waves when they're not being observed (Al-Khalili, 2013). In other words, when awareness is present, reality acts like it's made of separate objects. When awareness is absent, reality acts like it's one wave.

As long as we still believe in awareness, it is still operating in our experience, duality is present, and objects appear solid. But once awareness stops operating, it becomes visually obvious that reality (including our physical body) is one, interpenetrating, undulating wave. The self (subject) is no longer aware

of things (objects). Rather, experiences have themselves. In other words, seeing, itself, is what sees. Hearing, itself, is what hears. The experiences that used to be labeled as 'self' are now like all other experiences. For example, the wind, itself, is what blows. The rain, itself, is what falls. The heart, itself, is what beats. It's now clear that everything is this way and that awareness, or perception, is not required for anything to be what it is.

Beyond Awareness

Once we have seen through time and space, the concept of awareness stops making any sense. There is no space or distance between things, so it's clear that there are no separate objects, and there is no separate subject (or awareness) to be aware of them. And there is no time, or sequence of moments stacked one after the other, so it's clear that any memory we have of being aware of something is just a thought that's happening now. To keep moving forward at this point, we simply need to let go of our belief in awareness, consciousness, and any sort of expanded self. These experiences are no more (or less) real than anything else. They are simply concepts, or mental creations, and they are still part of the mind-made dream.

When we are still identified with awareness, we are able to put ourselves at a distance from the mental processes that cause our suffering and disidentify from them. Eventually, we will disidentify with the mental process of awareness as well. Now, we can no longer be at a distance from anything. It no longer feels like

we are sectioned off, observing everything—it feels like we are completely immersed in everything. We are life itself.

The Sensation of Self

As we let go of the attachment to having any sort of self whatsoever, we'll often find that there is still something there—a sensation that *feels* like a self. It might be described as a sense of contraction, resistance, separateness, pulling together, or other sensation. As we bring more awareness to this sensation, it becomes very clear that this one tiny sensation can not possibly be a self—it moves, fades, and sometimes even vanishes.

It can seem strange that there is still a part of us that feels like a self even after our beliefs in any sort of self are gone. But, indeed, we still experience sensations that seem to be proof of a separate self. Although we are freer than we ever imagined was possible, this last remaining sense of self, and its suffering, can stand out starkly against a nondual background.

What Created The Separate Self?

When we were a very young child, the mind resisted some aspect of experience and created the concepts of self/other to separate us from this discomfort. This split our experience of reality into two parts: the "self" and "everything else". Once the concepts of 'self' and 'other' were created, we lived in what appeared to be a

world of duality. Everything that was not the self seemed to be 'out there'. And 'in here', we felt a sensation that seemed to prove the existence of a self.

The mind then built huge, elaborate mazes to try to manage the inherently uncomfortable feeling of being separate from everything that we truly are. These mazes were made of even more concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions—all dualities that increased suffering even more. All of these complex mazes made it extremely difficult to find our way back.

For the majority of our lives, we did our best to find our way *through* these mazes. Sometimes, it even felt like we were making progress. Yet, we'd break free from one maze only to find ourselves in a new maze. Escape was utterly hopeless. Luckily, for many of us, realizing the hopelessness of our situation was a stepping stone to awakening.

When we entered the first stage of enlightenment, we finally got a glimpse of reality and saw that the mazes don't really exist. "Oh my god! There's a way out!" we may have thought. At this point, if we continued trying to find our way *through* these mazes, we stayed stuck in the earlier stages of enlightenment. But, if we instead shifted our focus to *deconstructing* the mazes—that is, we focused on seeing through concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and other mental illusions—then we kept moving forward. More and more mazes vanished right before our eyes.

If we've reached this point, most of the mazes are now gone. It's clear that they were illusions. Yet, the sensation of separateness—the mind's biggest illusion—still remains.

The Sensation Called "Me"

The sensation that feels like a me is likely the strongest illusion. Some even call it the 'the toxic starting point' because of all of the suffering it causes (Damore, 2023). For many of us, the sensation of self expresses as the bad, negative, or uncomfortable side of a duality. For example, it might feel tight, hot, fearful, pulsating, like a contraction, like suffering, like a clenched fist in the gut (Adyashanti, 2009), or like a knot (Ingram, 2018). The sense of me may be quite obvious or it may be as subtle as the scent of soap on a laundered shirt (Schanilec, n.d.) or even a taste (Michelberger, 2022).

For some people, the sensation labeled as "me" expresses as the good, positive, or comfortable side of the duality. For example, some people experience the sensation of self (especially the expanded self) as bliss and peace (e.g., Goode, 2016; Schanilec, n.d.). If this is the case for you, and your peace and bliss sustain themselves, then you might as well enjoy them. Just remember that if these experiences do fade, you can always come back to the stages and they'll be here waiting for you.

For those of us who don't experience peace and bliss here, the sense of me becomes increasingly uncomfortable (e.g., Ingram, 2018). This was certainly

true for me. In my own case, the sensation of me felt like a warm sensation pulling backward, away from everything else and moving down my throat, past my heart, and then settling in my solar plexus as a hot, tense, ball. As nonduality became increasingly clear, I felt more and more desperate to find a way out of the experience of 'me'.

Exercise: The Sensation Called "Me"

In this exercise, I invite you to explore the sensations that seem to create a sense of 'me' or 'I'.

- Start by feeling into the sensation of me or I. What does it feel like to be a me?
- Now, close your eyes for 30-60 seconds. If this sensation fades or disappears, just notice that.
- Open your eyes and look at whatever is in front of you. Keep your attention on the me sensation in your body. Does the me sensation arise, change, move, or intensify? Keep your eyes open for 30-60 seconds.
- Repeat the previous two steps a few times until you have a good idea of what the sensations feel like with your eyes both open and closed.
- You may also want to look at different objects to see when the sensation of me is the strongest. For example, the sensation might be stronger when looking at other people or anything else that might be threatening.
- Now, repeat the exercise again. This time, see if you can discover what it feels like as the sensation

is forming. It might feel like pulling or retreating backward away from external experience.

- Ask yourself, what do you think the function of this sensation is? You might feel like it's a protector, barrier, controller, filter, or separator of some sort.
- Now ask yourself, *why* are you attached to it? Is there a subtle belief that you need this sensation for some reason? What do you think would happen if you let go of it?

As you continue to observe the me sensation, it may become softer and quieter, or it may become louder and tighter. In my case, the sensation got really tight, almost as if it was trying to hold itself together.

What Is Hanging On?

If you have identified the sensation called me, start to question what is aware of it. Is there anything that could possibly be aware of it? Now, question whether there is something creating it. Could there be anything creating it? Now, question whether there is something holding onto it. Is there anything that could possibly hold onto it? Now, question if it feels separate from everything else. Is it possible that it is separate from anything? Finally, question where the sensation is located. Can you even say for sure that the sensation of self is inside 'you'? If we look carefully, we'll see that none of these are possible. Therefore, the sensation of self has to be an illusion.

Balancing Dualities In The Self

The self is dual, so the me sensation often seems like it is looking for something to compare itself to (Schanilec, n.d.). For example, it tends to pick a side of a strong duality and hold the feeling of being empty versus full, big versus small, less versus more, better versus worse, too much versus too little, seen versus unseen, safe versus unsafe, complete versus incomplete, or some other duality.

In my case, any time I felt too exposed, too visible, or took up too much space, the radiating ball of tension that seemed like a me would create a sort of boundary, barrier, or shield that appeared to protect itself. This shield (which felt like a self) would absorb the feelings that I didn't want to feel, trapping them in this painful ball of tension in my gut. And, when I felt the opposite—too invisible, small, or 'less than'—the sensation would seem to hollow out, making me feel empty, like I was nothing at all.

Because dualities aren't real, it's impossible to find the sweet spot in the middle. So, the experience of being a me is a constant battle that is impossible to win.

Trapped Trauma In The Sensation Called "Me"

Because the me sensation is sort of a boundary between us and everything else, it is our first line of defense against anything we don't want to feel. But

those feelings don't just disappear when they hit this imaginary boundary. It's more like they get absorbed or stuck to the me. These feelings stay stuck for as long as the me exists.

As long as we stay asleep, these painful feelings go with us wherever we are. When we start to wake up, many of our painful feelings are felt and released along with the different parts of the self-concept. But, once we begin to disidentify from the core *sensation* of me, and it starts to dissolve, whatever pain we are still carrying has nothing left to hold onto. Whether we like it or not, our pain is now free, and it comes up to be acknowledged, experienced, and finally, released.

In my own experience, I started to get angry quite a lot (which was very unusual for me). Then, memories and dreams popped up, drawing my attention to the sensations that still needed to be felt. Over the next few months, I frequently felt impotent rage—a sort of helpless desperation mixed with contempt. Each time the feelings arose, I just sat with them, allowing them to be exactly as they were. Over time, I was able to accept and feel genuine love towards the parts of me that felt rage and even hatred.

With more observation, it became clear that this anger was coming from the belief that "I am *less than* other people". This belief in our inferiority (or superiority), which may be called the 'conceit of me' (Schanilec, n.d.), often needs to be reconciled at this stage. So, I began doing exercises to help me experience the disowned side of this duality—in other words, I started

expressing myself from the belief that, "I am *more than* other people".

For example, I imagined expanding the small, tense ball that I called me, allowing it to spread into the room and out into the world. While going on walks, I found myself lying down on the sidewalk, allowing myself to take up as much space as I wanted, forcing people to walk around me. Although it felt uncomfortable, it also felt really freeing to experience the other side of this belief.

Exercise: Resolving Dualities

In this exercise, I invite you to identify one belief that creates a strong duality for you.

- First, name the belief.
- Explore how this belief contributes to thoughts, emotions, and actions that don't feel good.
- Now, name the opposing belief.
- How might you experiment with living from the opposite belief? How would you act differently?
- See if you can live from the opposite belief for a full day. Then, reflect on how it went and what you learned.

Every belief that we hold suppresses the opposing belief. When we begin to see that both sides of all beliefs are true (and untrue), they can dissolve, and the unnecessary tension that they hold is released.

The Beliefs That Maintain a “Me”

Sometime later, when the apparent realness of these beliefs started to fade, it became clear that the very desire to be seen or unseen, to be more or less was completely futile. Because there is no permanent, separate self, the self can never be seen. And because humans are constantly projecting their own thoughts onto others, seeing the world in their own unique ways, others will never see me the same way I see myself. In other words, all desires or outcomes based on duality are not only painful; they are impossible to achieve.

The Functions of “Me”

If the sensation called me still feels like it *needs* to exist, like it has an important purpose, it will hold on. For example, it may feel like a sense of safety, a sense of stability, or a shield against things that don't feel good. If there are parts of us that feel like they still need this protection or stability, the sensation of a separate self will resist liberation. Thus, it can be helpful at this stage to more deeply explore our beliefs around safety, stability, and feeling good. Our goal is to see through the concepts and beliefs that maintain the me sensation.

Exercise: The Functions of “Me”

Take a moment now to reflect on the following questions.

- Do you crave safety? Safety is a concept.
- Do you crave stability? Stability is a concept.
- Do you crave feeling good? Feeling good is a concept.
- Can any concept be real? Can you ever find what you're looking for?

While exploring these concepts, we'll often find that some of them seem more real or sticky than the others. Once you've identified your sticking points, see if you can find the corresponding belief. For example, do you believe that you need to protect yourself? Do you believe that life should always be stable or predictable? Or, do you believe that life should always feel good or never feel bad?

Once you've identified the beliefs that maintain your core sensation of self, start to question them. Pretty much everything can be seen through with a good dose of critical thinking and self-questioning.

Summary

Once you identify the core sensation of the self, you can begin to embody it, to really be with it. It'll soon become clear that this sensation (or identity) is still not the truth. It is part of the dream, just like everything else you've already seen through. Although the me sensation may pop in and out of your experience for a while, you'll know that it is nothing more than a sensation and eventually, you can disidentify with it completely.

CHAPTER 16

THE END OF SEEKING

As the beliefs and sensations that maintain the subtle self start to lose their grip, we begin to experience intense, impersonal energies without the barrier of the me to shield or protect us. Rather than experiencing these energies from the outside perspective of witnessing awareness, we now fully embody them (e.g., Goode, 2016). We are completely immersed in them with no separation possible at all. From the perspective of the self, these energies might be described as dualities like pain/pleasure, fear/bliss, suffering/peace, and others. From the perspective of enlightenment, these energies are simply nondual waves of suchness—they are neither positive nor negative.

My first major taste of this nondual, impersonal energy arose randomly one evening while reading a book. The sensation of 'me' suddenly popped out of existence, and wave after wave of terror rolled through my body.

Because there was no self here to create a shield, these feelings of terror could simply be what they are, unencumbered. This made it abundantly clear that the sensation of terror was the same sensation as bliss. It actually felt both scary and exciting, like being on a roller coaster, riding waves of terror/bliss.

By completely embodying the experience, the experience was felt fully, and in its fullness, its emptiness was revealed. Fear isn't actually real. The mind had labeled one sensation as two opposing concepts. Fear was just a concept—a label for the sensation. Bliss was the opposing concept—a second label for the exact same sensation. Fear and bliss were the same thing. And both were nothing.

Positive & Negative Feelings Are The Same

This insight reminded me of my graduate school training. We measured physiological responses to happy and sad film clips. The happy and sad film clips elicited similar physiological responses. There wasn't actually any way to distinguish positive from negative feelings other than people telling us that they were happy or sad (e.g., Mauss et al., 2005). In other words, the mind labels neutral sensations as good or bad. But the mind's labels are made up; they are not actually pointing to anything real.

Beyond Existential Fear

By embodying fear (or any feeling) fully—by becoming it—we discover that it is not real. This insight creates a previously unimaginable level of openness. If the scariest thing we could imagine—existential terror—is made up by the mind, then we truly have nothing to fear. We may still have the sensations that we formerly labeled as fear, but we now have experiential knowing that nothing is what it seems, and we become inclined to allow things to be what they truly are. Rather than avoiding experience, we now invite experiences to express themselves as they want to.

The Stubborn Sensation of "Me"

Despite having popped out temporarily, the sensation of me remained stubborn. One day, a few months later, I had a sudden insight that there is no me to hold onto the sensation of me. Immediately, the sensation of me dropped away again, and more waves of fear rolled through me. The fear felt like an intense sensation that was everything and everywhere. The imaginary border between the inside and outside of my body was gone.

Over the next few weeks, often while driving or buying groceries, waves of intense fear sensations randomly arose. Interestingly, there were also moments of heavy peace between the waves. If you've ever been caught in a torrential downpour, it was kind of like that. It was like I was moving through these storms of sensation that had nothing to do with me. I'd randomly get

caught in a 'sensation storm', get completely drenched, feel completely at peace in the eye of the storm, and then, about 10 seconds later, it would be gone. It was all very intense, but also quite fascinating.

Disidentifying From The Sensation of Me

In the following months, I slowly disidentified from the sensation of me. Gentle waves of fear still moved through from time to time, but eventually, it became clear that the sensation formerly known as 'me' was just a sensation. When it arose, it no longer felt like an identity. And when it faded, it no longer felt fear. In time, I started to notice that the less resistance I had to my fear, the less the sensation of me arose. In other words, the me was just resistance to fear. As both the fear and the resistance lessened, I felt less and less separate from anything.

Core Suffering

By this point, I had seen through many of the dualities that once seemed so real, and underneath was a nondescript, heavy pain or suffering. Research shows that the neural underpinnings of physical pain and emotional pain are basically the same (Eisenberger, 2012). It is only the mind that labels these types of pain as two different things. At this point, I was beyond these mental labels, and I could not have told you whether this pain was emotional or physical—it was both.

This nondescript suffering felt very familiar, and upon reflection, it was clear that this sensation had been present during all of the unpleasant experiences in my life and even most of the pleasant ones. I hated this sensation, and yet, I knew that the only way forward was to feel it fully. So, over the next few weeks, I sat with this nondescript pain, this suffering, for as long as I could stand, trying to acknowledge it and accept it for what it was.

One day, while laying in a park, the intensity of the pain faded until all that remained was neutral heaviness. The sensation started to resemble the heavy peace I'd experienced a few weeks earlier.

Suddenly, the question arose in my mind: "Were suffering and peace the same thing?!" The answer was immediately obvious. Suffering—and its apparent opposite, peace—were just concepts. They were a duality and neither one was real.

This insight made me feel really uncomfortable. I had spent my entire life, both professionally and personally, seeking ways to reduce suffering. Yet, strangely, I wasn't quite ready to let suffering go. "Who would I be without suffering?" I wondered.

Accepting Reality As It Is

When I discovered that the concepts of suffering and peace were not real, it was disappointing. I grieved for a life unlived, a life where suffering didn't occupy most of my attention. But slowly, I began to accept that suffering wasn't a real thing.

Soon, I was ready to embody the sensation of suffering once again. I sat with the sensations, and as I let go of the resistance to suffering, it morphed into a mixture of heavy peace and bliss. I could no longer deny it; suffering was literally the same thing as peace. It's only when we *resist* peace that it feels like suffering. When we *resist* bliss, it feels like fear. When we *resist* pleasure, it feels like pain. In other words, resistance creates the illusion of duality. Resistance creates the sense of self. Resistance creates attachment and aversion. And resistance creates all of the suffering that follows.

Dissolving Dualities

When we're living in duality, we are constantly looking for the sweet spot between opposites. We want freedom. But not too much because that would be scary and not too little because that would be boring. We want love. But not too much because that would feel smothering and not too little because that would feel lonely. We even want suffering. But just enough to make us feel alive, not so much that it hurts. Some part of us seems to know that happiness can't be found in dualities, so we resist both sides and look for happiness in the middle, in between these opposites.

The human experience is then characterized by bouncing back and forth between too much and too little of everything, trying to find a middle point that is satisfying. But the *self's* attempt to find a happy medium is utterly futile because we're searching for

satisfaction between two things that don't exist. If we can just see that there is no satisfaction—that there is no sweet spot between opposites—then we will gain experiential knowing that there is nothing actually there—there are no opposites and there is no middle that is satisfying.

Once we see that the mind has made everything up, surrender happens on its own because we no longer have the idea that we can actually get, change, or achieve anything. Nothing is available, but luckily, everything is already what we seek.

Exercise: Looking for The Sweet Spot

To explore your own sweet spots, choose a concept that you really want. Don't choose an object or situation (like money or a relationship). Rather, look deeper to see if you can find the concept that you are really seeking. For example, if you want a relationship, you might really be seeking belonging or acceptance. If you want success, you might really be craving approval or love. If you want money, you might really desire safety or security. Each person is different, so your task is to figure out the deepest need or want that is below your more practical or superficial wants. Then, look to see if the experience you're looking for—the sweet spot—even exists.

For example, we can look for the sweet spot between:

- Belonging and being smothered
- Acceptance and enabling

- Safety and boredom

If we look closely enough at any concept—any experience that we crave—we'll see that it's not actually possible. Our minds have convinced us that these things are real so that we keep pursuing them. But once we see that everything we have ever desired isn't real, we free ourselves from needing anything to be different than how it is.

Exercise: What Do You Resist?

Each of us is different, and as such, different resistance patterns may need to be explored at this stage (Ingram, 2018; Schanilec, n.d.). To point you in the right direction, ask yourself, which of the following would you *most* like to be true?

1. **Desire:** You can always feel good, happy, satisfied, etc...
2. **Aversion:** You never have to feel emotional or physical pain.
3. **Permanence:** Things can stay the same and will never change.
4. **Predictability:** Things are reliable and you can always know what's going to happen.
5. **Solidity:** Things are solid and real.

Take a moment now to simply sit with these statements and feel the sensations of wanting these things to be true.

Unfortunately, none of these statements are true.

Now, take a moment to sit with this information and feel the sensations that arise when hearing that they are not true. Do you feel the sensation of resistance? Do you feel suffering? Do you feel attachment and aversion? Just try to feel whatever it is you feel.

The Mind's Seeking

While having dinner with some friends, I found myself getting annoyed with one woman who talked about herself a lot. I knew that my annoyance was all in my mind, so I just kept watching my thoughts to see what they were saying. My thoughts said things like, "She should ask more questions to others," or "She shouldn't talk about herself so much." My mind just kept looking for a different, more satisfying experience.

Then a funny thing happened. She asked me a question about myself. My mind immediately switched to the other side of the duality—now it suddenly didn't want to be asked *any* questions. "Oh no, now I have to talk about myself," the mind exclaimed self-consciously. In this moment, I realized that there was nothing this woman could do—nothing anyone could do—to make the mind happy. The mind's nature is to be dissatisfied. And as long as I listened to the mind, I was stuck looking for satisfaction (or happiness or peace) in the imaginary space between imaginary opposites.

Upon having this realization, my annoyance immediately melted away. After this, I was even able to enjoy the remainder of my time with this woman.

Without the mind clinging to some imaginary middle ground—some specific way that she was *supposed to* be—there wasn't actually any problem or negative feelings. Without the mind constantly seeking for things to be different, everything was already fine the way it was.

The End of Seeking

When we finally see that it's completely pointless to try to change anything—that we can't actually do anything to create what we want or find what we seek, we hop off the treadmill of seeking it (e.g., Schanilec, n.d.). It becomes obvious that we've been running in place this whole time, wasting ridiculous amounts of energy, pursuing things that don't even exist. It is absolute insanity the way we were living, seeking to find what is literally impossible to find. Once it is clear that there is nothing to seek and nothing to find, then seeking ends.

As this insight clarifies, it becomes clear that nothing that happens is right or wrong. When thoughts don't label things in such a way, everything just is what it is. Experiences aren't interpreted as good or bad, and if a thought tries to label an experience as such, we immediately see the falsity in its claim.

Seeing Through Our Final Concepts

Because our mind is so convincing, we believe that concepts are real. Every time reality tried to reveal the truth, to show us that no concept is real, the mind

created beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that hid the truth. Although it may have seemed like other things caused suffering at different points along the path, it is now seen that suffering is simply resistence—or the concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that make it seem like anything could be different than how it is.

This suffering continues all the way through awakening (but whether we are aware of it or not seems to vary). This is because our minds continue trying to convince us that concepts are real. Perhaps we hold onto the idea that there is some purpose to life. But 'purpose' is a concept. Maybe we still believe that we are awareness or we have some sort of self. But awareness and self are concepts. Or, maybe we hold onto the hope that something is solid, satisfying, or permanent. But these, too, are concepts. As Adyashanti says, enlightenment is "the complete eradication of everything we imagined to be true" (Adyashanti, 2009). Indeed, even the idea of truth, itself, is seen to be unreal. Everything we ever thought we knew was just a concept, made up by the mind. We don't actually know anything, we never have, and we never will.

No matter how far we get into the awakening journey, we'll stay stuck if we remain attached to concepts. If we believe in anything, we stay caged. If we can instead realize that we will never know anything, then we are totally free. If we can accept that there is no permanent meaning anywhere, then everything is free. And if we can understand that there is no true 'way things are' or 'way things should be', then there is nothing left to resist and suffering can end.

Resistance Is Suffering

Resistance is simply the concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that tell us that reality is, or should be, different than it is. Although it's fine to say 'let go', 'surrender', or 'stop resisting', we generally can not do so until we clearly see the truth about resistance. We might first see that resistance creates suffering. Peace + resistance = angst. Bliss + resistance = fear. Pleasure + resistance = pain. Without resistance, everything is just fine.

We may also begin to see that resistance isn't even resisting anything real. Resistance thinks that it's resisting pain, angst, or fear, but it's not; resistance is creating them. The things that resistance resists aren't even real until it resists them. It is quite the paradox.

Finally, it is seen that even resistance, itself, is not real. It was only ever a concept that we believed in—a collection of subtle thoughts that labeled certain sensations in the body. When the belief in resistance dissolves and we stop identifying with the associated sensations, it finally starts to fade away, and suffering goes along with it.

The Sensation of Rising Resistance

After we have seen that nothing is real in the way we thought it was, after we have dissolved our concepts, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions, we can now observe

the physical sensations that seemed to lead to resistance. This might feel like energy rushing up into the head and then casting about like a spotlight, looking for some sort of mental activity to resist our current discomfort (e.g., Schanilec, n.d.). If we can just be with this sensation, it'll become clear that it is not us, and we can disidentify from it.

The first time I experienced this was when I accidentally smashed my toe. Pain arose, and I felt an immediate rush of attention into the mind, as if it was looking for complaining, or blaming, or some resistance pattern to reduce the discomfort. It was a habit of attention to look around the mind for the dissatisfied thoughts that would normally arise, but this time, the thoughts never started up. So, attention just lingered on the 'rising up' sensation, itself. When attention didn't find anything, it got bored, stopped looking, and faded away. The pain was there but the suffering wasn't. What do ya know? Suffering really can stop.

Summary

As we near the end of the path, we let go of our stickiest beliefs and concepts. Not only do we see them as unreal, we actually experience them as unreal. Eventually, everything is seen to be both true and untrue, real and unreal. There is no self to be enlightened. There is no resistance to stop. There is no suffering to end. There is simply nothing left. Thus, we are left with nothing (and everything).

STAGE 4 OF ENLIGHTENMENT

CHAPTER 17

LIBERATION

As more concepts liberate themselves from the illusion of a separate existence, all that's left is 'isness'. We no longer feel that we are the doer of actions or the creator of outcomes, yet things still get done. We are no longer the thinker, yet thoughts still arise. We are no longer the seer, the hearer, or the experiencer of our sensations, yet things are still heard, seen, and felt. Everything is simply experienced by experience itself.

In one way, nothing is different. Life continues to play out its stories like it always has, and we continue to live our lives. Our life may look different than before awakening, or it may not, but it doesn't really matter anymore—we're simply along for the ride. We still have friends, most of whom know nothing about our journey through the stages of enlightenment. And we still have jobs, continue to pay our bills, and look like every other person on the street. Although we may, at

times, seem strange to others, not much has changed, and life continues on as normal.

In another way, everything is different. When we no longer identify with or believe in anything, we move through life in a distinctly different way. Although we may go with the flow of the crowd, we don't fight the current. We are rafting down the river of life while at the same time being the river. Thus, life becomes simply a series of surprises that pop up around each corner. Even simple experiences like looking, feeling, or hearing create a sense of awe. Simply stated, we are completely immersed in something that words can not describe.

The Anti-Climax

Although we may have thought that enlightenment would be some big climactic moment, it's often not like that. Many of us continue to unstick ourselves from our unique collection of mind-made illusions like we are picking barbed prickers off our socks after walking through a field of weeds. At some point, taking life seriously seems silly, and hunting down our remaining illusions becomes kind of fun. "How will the mind try to trick us next?!" we may think. The game of life is still playing, but now it's clear that we are not the ones playing it.

Beyond The Self

It is now obvious that there are no selves with control over their actions, so there is no one to be upset at, no one to blame, and no one to fight against. Although we can see that most human behavior is completely insane, we know that it can be no other way. So there is simply no reason not to meet everyone with complete acceptance, not because we are trying to be 'kind'—which is just a concept—but because there is no one there who could decide to be any different than they are. We can still set boundaries and protect ourselves as needed, but we're no longer trying to change anyone or anything. Everything just is as it is, and everyone is who they are. To resist this is suffering.

The Dream of Suffering

After the belief in suffering is gone, it may take a little time to work its way into physical experience. One day suffering may seem to be there, and then we step across the street and something shifts (e.g., Schanilec, n.d.). Some of us may not even be able to identify the precise moment when suffering stopped. For others, it doesn't even really matter much anymore if suffering stops. Suffering is seen to be an illusion, so even if we get sucked back into the dream of suffering every now and then, it is understood to be just another part of the mystery and magnificence of life. Because we know it's just a dream, we can now look upon the dream with acceptance.

The Paradox of The Path

To complete the path to full enlightenment, we have to acknowledge, experience, and accept all of our beliefs, thoughts, and emotions. This means fully embodying our pain, fear, and grief as well as our joy, love, and bliss. Paradoxically, by experiencing everything completely, it becomes obvious that none of it was ever real to begin with.

Fullness and emptiness are the same thing. Everything and nothing are the same thing. Seeking and avoiding end up at the same place. Exploring the self is the same as exploring the lack of self. All paths have the potential to lead to enlightenment because enlightenment is already everything. In other words, if you look deeply enough into anything, you can find enlightenment.

There is no meditation technique, no self-inquiry approach, and no psychological process that is better than any other one. There is no right or wrong way. No good or bad path. No better or worse practice. Whatever path you take, it can lead you to the end—to the realization that even the path, itself, is an illusion.

Final Thoughts

I am finishing this book knowing that this is not the end. More clarity can always be had. More patterns will continue to erode. Suffering will continue to dissolve. Yet, the book is ready to be done. Although writing

about the awakening process has been a great joy, words are woefully inadequate for describing something that is beyond words, and life is nudging me out into the world to share this insight in new ways. So now is the time to let go of the reins and allow this book to go wherever it wants to go.

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